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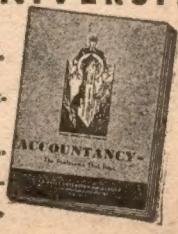

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Vol. 71, No. 2—July, 1949 A THRILLING PUBLICATION TWENTY-THIRD YEAR

COMPLETE NOVEL

Deep Hills

By L. P. Holmes

When Britt Larkin champions the sodbusters of Beaver Flat, a tough gang of grim gunfighters saddles up to salivate him—while the range rocks with thunder as ranchers and homesteaders clash in roaring conflict! 9

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HI, WADDIES, gather 'round the old chuck wagon while we ladle out the latest in rodeo and range news and gossip. After a fair season in 1948, a season that however fell a little short of the season before in money and attendance, rodeo has started the 1949 season with much promise. It looks like it is going to be a big one. Of course the shows on which reports are in, staged early this year, have been indoor shows that are not so much affected by the weather. The weather is one thing that spoils a good many outdoor shows each season, shows that with good weather would go over and be successful.

The first rodeo of the season was the Lakeland, Florida Rodeo, staged by the Junior Chamber of Commerce, and produced by Oscar Clemens. Among the contract performers, in trick riding, were Peaches King, Fay Blackstone, Bobby Boulter and Nellie Rogers. Bob Hoeld was present with his bucking Ford. The clown was Billy Keen.

The final results in calf roping were: First, Pete Clemons; second, Doyle Riley; third, E. Pardee; fourth, Claude Tindell.

Tom Cordry won the bronc riding, Glen McKinney was second, Johnnie King was third and Pete Clemons fourth.

Glen McKinney copped the steer wrestling, Pete Clemons was second, King Kong Smith was third and Tom Cordry fourth. Pete Clemons was best man in the bull riding, D. C. Beville was second, Larry Reidel was third and Glen McKinney was fourth.

Pioneer Days Show

Their 1948 Pioneer Days Rodeo having been a big success at Ogden, Utah, the directors have set their 1949 dates for July 20th to 25th, and are working on preparations for the big show. Mayor Harmon W. Perry is in charge of the preparations. He has been the guiding hand of the big event for many years and has really brought the Ogden show to the front ranks.

The recent Rodeo Cowboys Association Convention, held in Denver, was a big success. More than 150 rodeos submitted their prize lists to be passed upon by the R.C.A. board of directors, and many problems confronting the organization were worked out. It all points to the continued progress of the sport of the cowboy.

One ruling made by the association is to the effect that producers staging what are commonly called wildwest rodeos, that is, rodeos where the participants work on salary instead of for prizes, will be blacklisted by the association, and likewise any participant in such shows will be blacklisted and will not be allowed to work at the regular recognized rodeos. This, it is thought, will do away with so many rodeos being staged and advertised as regular contest rodeos when they are nothing more than exhibitions.

The National Western

The National Western Livestock Show Rodeo at Denver, Colorado, was a big eve t—in fact the whole show was too big for the space. 140,000 was the estimated attendance. It could have been 50,000 more had there been space to accommodate that many more, so plans are under way for a $2,700,000 stadium for the 1950 show.

The National Western is the first really big rodeo of the season, and the number of entries of contestants is the largest in the country, as the show comes at a time where there are no other rodeos and therefore gets most all of the top hands as well as a great num-

ber of the average run of contestants. There were a total of 267 contestants entered in the rodeo this year.

John T. Cain, III, general manager of the show, said that the present period is one of expansion and immediate construction of the new stadium will boost the show's chances of tremendous growth.

Two million dollars in city funds have been approved and allocated for the project, the remaining $700,000 being collected under a fund-raising program which already has netted thousands of dollars and is being pushed as fast as possible. So the chances are good for Denver to have an excellent stadium in which to house a great show.

A String of Rodeos

Col. Jim Eskew, of the JE Ranch Rodeo, is said to have lined up quite a string of rodeos for the coming season. His tour this year, it is said, will include three rodeos in Canada. He was scheduled to open at Charlotte, North Carolina, and after that to play a number of indoor arenas in the east. He will then return to the home ranch at Waverly, New York, for the annual rodeo there, and then play outdoor arenas until the fall season, when he will again go into the indoor arenas for the balance of the season.

The recent Circle T. Ranch Rodeo at Indiantown, Florida, was one of the best little rodeos staged in Florida in quite a while. It was produced by G. E. Troup on his 39,000 acre ranch with approximately 5,000 in attendance at the one performance, and the show was so good that a number of scouting committees were in the audience. Among them was a committee from the Optimist Club of Miami, which made a contract with Mr. Troup to produce a rodeo in the Orange Bowl at Miami.

Troup is endeavoring to build up a circuit of four or five real rodeos in Florida each winter, a circuit large enough to entice the top hands of the rodeo game to the land of sunshine for winter rodeos.

The results of the Indiantown rodeo in steer wrestling were: First, Babe Ashton; second, Pete Clemons; third, Tom Cordry; fourth, Bobby Boulter; fifth, Shorty Porter; sixth, Stewart Bowker.

Ralph Collier won the calf roping, Snooks Burton was second, Jim Day was third, Glen McKinney was fourth, Newton Poole was

(Continued on page 122)

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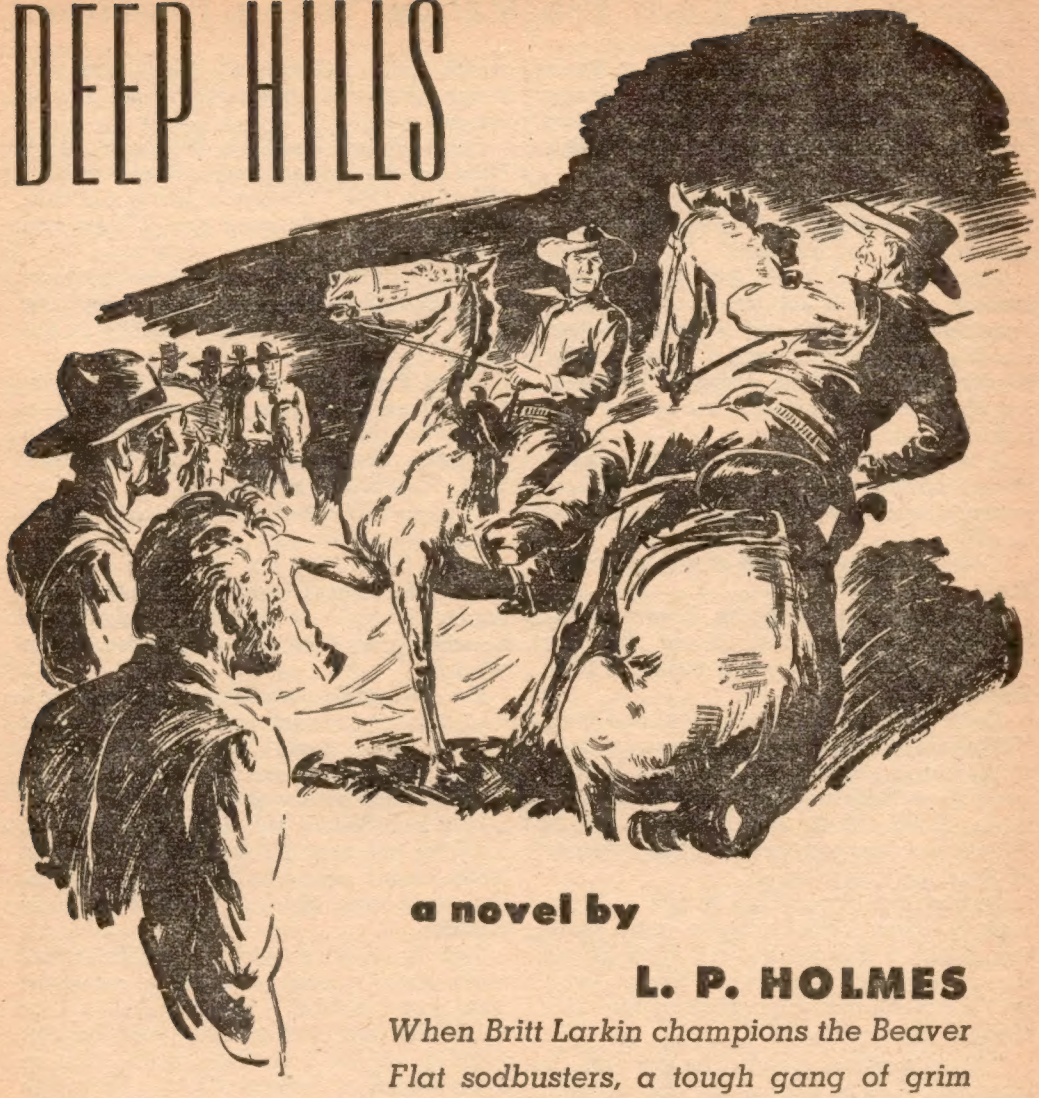


a novel by

L. P. HOLMES

When Britt Larkin champions the Beaver Flat sodbusters, a tough gang of grim gunfighters saddles up to salivate him!

CHAPTER I

Fandango!

THE RATAPLAN of hoofs was a long, rushing thunder down the dark timber road. Len Revis twisted in his saddle to listen, then said, "Running S. Hell-for-leather, as usual. They'll ride us down."

As he spoke, Len was reining over to the side of the road. Britt Larkin said, "Don't do, that, Len. Never give more than half of a trail to Jesse Schell. If you do, next pass he'll push you still further out into the brush. You ought to know good old Jesse by this time."

On either hand the timber lifted in black walls, with only the ragged crests of it silvered by the starlight, a cold radiance that could not reach the road. The headlong approach of the Running S sent the echoes tumbling out ahead of them.

Swinging back beside Larkin, Len Revis murmured drily, "Never could see any profit in foolin' around in front of any kind of a stampede. There's easier ways to die."

Britt Larkin laughed. "Horses don't run as blind as cattle. Nor," he added as an afterthought, "as humans."

The tumult of hoofs behind funneled swiftly closer. Then there was a wild lunging and rearing and a hard, startled cursing as riders, some of them nearly thrown by the sudden rearing and dodging of their horses, fought the animals for control.

A voice, heavy, intolerant and impatient, lashed out, a quick, raging note of anger in it: "You fools deaf? Want all the road?"

Britt Larkin answered. "Just half of it, Jesse. Our half."

"Larkin!" exploded the heavy voice. "Might have known it. Some day, my friend, that chip on your shoulder will be knocked off."

Britt Larkin's laugh was low and cool. "What chip? Your imagination runs away with you, as usual. Why always such a rush, Jesse? Hard on men, hard on horseflesh. Even hard on the disposition. Nights are long—so are the days. Plenty of time for everything."

Out of the discomfited tangle of Running S riders a heavy figure came pushing. Even in this velvet dark Jesse Schell was a presence, his personality as large and thrusting and impressive as his thick thewed physical bulk.

"As long as we're here," he growled, "a question. You're headin' for the valley?"

"Obviously. The road leads down, doesn't it?"

FROM the dark bulk of the riders came a voice, hard and metallic and toneless. "Don't listen to his mealy mouthed palaver! Make him give you a straight answer, Jesse. Yes or no!"

Instantly Britt Larkin was pushing his horse toward the voice. Now there was no laughter in him, nor drawling humor in his tone. "Obe Widdens. Back in the shadows, as usual—tossing in his dime's worth from a distance. When you talk tough, Widdens, come out where a man can see you."

Jesse Schell spun his horse to block Britt Larkin's way and yelled harshly, "Shut up, Obe! Keep your jaw out of this. When I want talk from you, I'll let you know."

"You should teach your dog better manners, Jesse," rapped Larkin. "Everybody hates a cur that does its snarling in the dark."

Jesse Schell growled, "Let it lay, Larkin. There's talk of a party on tonight—a fandango thrown by the sod-busters to celebrate their arrival in the promised land. You taking it in?"

"I'll probably be somewhere around the edges. Why?"

Jesse Schell did not answer for a moment. He gave the impression of searching for the right words for his reply. Then he said, "See that you stay—around the edges."

Before Larkin could speak again, Schell was leaning forward and using his spurs and his horse, leaping forward, went surging away, Schell's men racing after him. In the crush, as one of them hurtled past, a long arm flicked out, just touching Britt Larkin's hat, nearly knocking it off. Then Britt Larkin and Len Revis were alone, the acrid tang of churned dust in their nostrils.

Len Revis murmured, "Thought it was town and the mail and mebbe a two-bit limit game of stud?"

"I'll let you tend to that," said Larkin, tugging his hat into place again. "I'll be stopping off at Beaver Flats." His voice was low, had a cold ring to it.

"You can't kick every dog that snarls in the dark," complained Len. "Let 'em yap."

Larkin put his horse to a jog. "If you stand for their yapping long enough, they get bold enough to try a bite. And good old Jesse, he would say the wrong thing."

"I know—I know," growled Revis. "He should have told you to be sure and turn up at that fandango. Then you'd have made a point of staying away. Now if I can just nurse you through another five

years of life, mebbe you'll be old enough and wise enough to forget such contrariness."

Larkin's chuckle ran soft through the dark. "A cautious man misses half the fun of life, Len."

The progress of Running S was just a fading echo now, coming back up from the timber depths. Presently it was entirely gone and the night relaxed to its usual brooding stillness. The road dropped ever down, twisting and winding, then running

A man was hanging from the projecting ridge pole (CHAP. VIII)

arrow straight across a benchland as though eager to break from the timber into the wide reaching open of the valley below.

This freedom achieved, it relaxed to a casual looping across the open slopes to the final valley flats.

Here the starlight became real instead of illusory, flooding the valley with silver. Lights winked up from Beaver Flats. Fires were burning down there, a rough circle of them.

"Looks like that fandango is already under way," said Len Revis. Then added cynically, ""Could be a mite premature, that celebration. Now that I recollect, you ain't had much to say about that squatter camp, Britt. I'm wonderin' what you're thinkin'."

"Why, only that they're a long way from the high parks we call home, Len. They'll never bother us."

Len Revis, a high, gaunt figure in the saddle, shrugged his skepticism. "You never can tell. Squatters is like the itch. They spread."

This was Reservation Valley, lonely under the wide Oregon sky, deep matted with sage brush, except for the flats along the Saber River and of these flats, those along the eastern run of the river were the largest. Here burned the fires of the squatter camp.

TEN miles west along the river were pin points of other lights, where stood Fort Cord, once a military Post, a drab little cow country town now, fed by a stage and freight road which ran south for forty long miles to the railroad at Button Willow.

North lifted the Royale Mountains, terraced with timber, yet holding long running, richly grassed high parks where the cattle outfits watched their herds grow fat.

Britt Larkin reined in. "Along with

picking up the mail, Len, locate Hack Dinwiddie and tell him we're holding our cavvy for that shoeing chore. Tell him I'd like to see him up at the ranch within the next day or two."

"A'right," growled Revis. "But I still say it would pay us to set up our own forge and shoe our own broncs."

Larkin's ready chuckle sounded again. "Hack's got a right to make a living too, you know. Unless you watch out, you'll be as bad as Alec Creager and Jesse Schell, worrying about money and profits."

"What's wrong with tryin' to save money?" retorted the badgered Revis. "But what I'm really worried about is you, prowling around that fandango. You'll stick your nose into trouble—sure."

Larkin fired until his gun was empty — at the flash of Jesse Schell's weapon (CHAP. XIII)

"No trouble there, Len."

"There will be," prophesied Len darkly. "Jesse Schell and Alec Creager will see to that. Town can wait. You better let me shag along with you."

"You get along to town. If you're still worried, you can stop by on your way back and pick up the remains."

"You," charged Len Revis, twitching his reins, "will never get over being a bumptious, brassy kid."

Larkin spun a cigarette into shape as he watched Len Revis disappear into the star haze. Then he swung his horse and headed off through the sage toward those winking fires on Beaver Flats. Alone, the humor dried out of him and the hard set of his jaw belied Len Revis' parting remark. Britt wasn't forgetting that outflung arm that had nearly knocked his hat off, back there along the road in the timber.

You let a thing like that pass, he thought, and the next time they tried to knock your head off.

Here the sage was thick and high. This was good land. It took good land to grow sage brush this size. But how could such land be brought fully to use unless the brush was cleared first? And who would

ever clear the brush except men like those squatters yonder?

These, he considered, were thoughts which Alec Creager and Jesse Schell might well play with.

As he broke finally from the sage, into the clear of Beaver Flats, the sounds of merry-making reached him. Over at the fire circle a fiddle was singing and a banjo thumping. Some of the younger squatter folk were already dancing, not at all mindful that underfoot lay only earth instead of a sanded floor.

Older folk were grouped about, clapping their hands in time to the music beat, adding their voices to the chant of the caller. Children skylarked at play in the fascinating half-light, half-dark where the night and the fire glow came together. Wagons stood about and there were horses champing at wild hay, stacked against the

wagon wheels. Off to one side several women were tending a glowing fire pit and the savory smell of barbecuing meat was in the air.

CHAPTER II

Cowman's Warning

FOR some time Britt sat his horse in the gloom beside a wagon, unnoticed. Then a couple, arm in arm, broke from the circle about the dancers and headed for the fire pit. The man's quick eyes picked out Britt's motionless figure. He stopped, said something in a low tone to his feminine companion, then stepped forward.

"Lookin' for somebody maybe, cowboy?" His tone was neither friendly or otherwise, just flat and terse.

"No," answered Britt. "Nobody. Just looking on."

"Maybe what you see don't please you?"

"Wouldn't say that. I like to see people happy. The world could stand more of it."

"Why then," exclaimed the nester, startled, "you're welcome to step down and join in. Nothing we folks would like better than to be friends with the cattle interests in this country."

"That," said Britt quietly, "may prove difficult in some quarters. Speaking personally, don't mind if I do."

He swung from his saddle, put out his hand.

"Larkin's the name. Britt Larkin."

"Ah!" murmured the nester. "Matt Filchock said you probably wouldn't be too hard to get along with. He named only you, though. Partee, here. Cass Partee."

Partee's handshake was solid, with the spring of youth in it.

"Leave your bronc here and come meet some of the folks."

Cass Partee's feminine companion stood where he had left her. Now he led Britt over there and said, "Meet Rose Calloway. Rose—Britt Larkin."

Her features were indistinct in the gloom, but her voice as she greeted him was low, grave, restfully soft. Somehow Britt knew that she would be pretty. She had a strong, vigorous grace as she took Partee's arm again and moved between them toward the fires.

But if the greeting of Cass Partee and Rose Calloway had been friendly enough, things were different at the fires. No sooner did Britt come fully into the light than a murmured stirring ran through the night. The clapping of hands ceased, the chant of the caller stopped abruptly, the dancers quit dancing and the music ran out and then died in a high, off-key fiddle note.

A BLOCKY, bearded man growled, "I knew it was too good to last." He moved over to face Britt, his eyes burning with truculence. "Now I suppose, we will hear the same old story. That we can't stay here, that this is cattle range, that it is controlled by such-and-such an outfit, that we, though human beings, are still just worms and that we must wiggle on. Something along that line, which we've heard before. Well, this time it is different. We don't move on. We're staying!"

The girl, Rose Calloway, said in her gentle way, "You're jumping at conclusions, Father. I don't believe Mr. Larkin feels that way about us at all."

Oake Calloway laughed scoffingly. "If he doesn't, daughter, then he is the first. I'll have to hear him say it."

Britt looked around. The nesters were gathering on all sides of him, first the men, then behind them the women. Even the skylarking kids sensed the change and their shrill voices had quieted. Britt brought his glance back to Oake Calloway.

"As far as I know," he said quietly, "this land belongs to no one except the Government. It is part of the old Fort Cord military reservation, long since abandoned and deserted. You people have as much right to it as anybody. And it is not good cow country—the sage is too high and thick. There's no room for grass to grow except along the river flats, and there's not enough grass there to warrant bringing a herd down out of the high parks to pasture on it. Now if I was a nester," he ended, placing each word distinctly, "I'd dig in right here and I wouldn't let any man push me out."

A murmur of almost disbelief ran around the listening group. Oake Calloway said, "Those are words I never expected to hear from the lips of any cattleman. You make it sound almost as though we were welcome, cowboy."

Britt Larkin shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned, you are. But I warn you, I'm speaking only for myself. There are others who may feel differently. I didn't mean to break up the fun. I'll get along."

"You will not!" said Cass Partee swiftly. "I invited you to join us, and I meant it. That barbecued beef smells like it is about ready. You'll stay and eat. Any objections, Oake?"

Oake Calloway considered a moment, then shook his head. "Not right now."

"I have," said a harsh, nasal voice. "I'm not too sure this feller ain't a spy, sent down here by them Royale Mountains cattle interests to look us over and get an idee how many there are of us and how much equipment we got. He's said things which, like Oake Calloway says, I never expected to hear from any cow man. I find 'em hard to believe."

The speaker had come pushing up beside Oake Calloway and stood there, gaunt, long-faced, bitter of eye and lip. Hatred blazed in his glance.

Britt Larkin's lips thinned. "I ain't used to being called a liar," he said tersely. "But I'll let it pass this time, all things considered. I can see you'll enjoy yourselves better without me around. Good luck!"

Britt headed back for his horse, shaking off Cass Partee's protesting hand. Partee followed him, saying, "Sod Tremper ain't speaking for all the rest of us, Larkin. He's just a bitter old devil, Tremper is, but maybe he can't be blamed. Cattle interests killed his son, back in the Rubicon Valley nester-cattleman war. His wife didn't last long, after that. I'm certainly sorry about this. I know that you're sincere, Larkin."

Instinctively Britt liked this young nester—this Cass Partee. There was something rugged and straightforward about him, a quiet, well balanced, dependable strength. The thin edge of anger that had formed in Britt, ran out of him.

He said, "That's all right. In the old fellow's boots I'd probably feel the same, maybe worse."

Britt went into his saddle as he spoke, but he did not rein his horse around. Instead, he stood high in his stirrups, leaning a little forward, listening. Down along the dark flats to the west came the muffled trampling of hoofs.

"If I'm guessing right," said Britt crisply, "old man Tremper is liable to have real cause for hating something before long. Get out among your people, Partee—quick! Tell them not to start anything, even if they're pushed around some. I'll try and handle things for you. I think I can. Hurry up! Tell 'em for this time to hold their tempers."

CASS PARTEE hurried off. Britt Larkin pulled his horse into the shadow of a wagon and waited.

Those approaching hoofs came on at a trot, slowing to a walk as the riders came into the reflected glow of the first fires. In the lead was Jesse Schell. Riding beside him was a big boned, harsh jawed, frosty browed man and a slim, proud figure whose bared head glinted red-gold where the fire gleam touched it. Alec Creager and his prideful, headlong daughter, Marty!

Behind these three were lined a full dozen cattle hands, most of them running S, the others of Alec Creager's Shield and Cross outfit. At the far end of this line was Obe Widdens, lank and loose, his hat as usual riding far back on his bony head, his eyes flat and hard and all aglitter with the anticipation of rough mischief against these nester folk.

There was an instinctive bunching up of the nesters, as though for mutual protection, but out of this group stepped the solid steady figure of Oake Calloway, his deep voice booming.

"Come for talk or trouble, friends?"

Jesse Schell reined to a halt, not answering for a moment, while his glance swung right and left and down the full length of the camp. There was arrogance in him and a hard, ruthless pressure. Finally his glance came back to Oake Calloway.

"It all depends," he said. "I'll talk and you'll listen. If you listen real close and are guided by what you hear, there won't be any trouble. But the trouble is here, if it is necessary. And you can drop that final word, because it's the wrong word. We're not—friends."

Even at this distance and in the poor light, Brittt Larkin could see the dark blood burn in Oake Calloway's leathery face.

"Have your say," he growled.

"You seem to be celebrating something," said Jesse Schell, a jeering mockery in the tone. "What it could be I can't guess. You've this night to get it out of your systems. In the morning, you'll be moving on. East or west or south, I don't care which, but you're getting out of Reservation Valley. Right now I'm interested in that beef I smell cooking. I'm wondering—whose beef? Widdens, go down to that fire pit and bring me the hide—if there is a hide. There had better be."

Obe Widdens lifted his horse to a run, cutting so close to the group of nesters a gaunt woman had to snatch a big eyed, scared youngster to her, to keep the child from being ridden down. Widdens' lips peeled back in a soundless, wolfish laugh.

The next moment Obe Widdens had to set his horse back on its haunches to avoid a collision with a rider who had darted out from the shadow of a wagon. And Britt

Larkin was saying curtly: "Let's not get rough, Obe. Let's not get rough. Go back where you came from, and ride careful while you do it!"

CHAPTER III

Man Size

A LONG moment passed. Obe Widdens could no nothing but sit his dancing horse, too surprised to think. Then his lips peeled back and his flat, hard eyes took on the fixed glare of a cornered animal. His right hand seemed to hang in the air, hesitant, fluttering.

Britt Larkin laughed, but there was little humor in it.

"Go ahead, Obe, and try it!" he taunted. "It's about time you and others learned a lesson. Go ahead, try it!"

Widdens wanted to try it, wanted desperately to try it but he didn't dare. The cold, reckless challenge in Britt's eyes flayed him, whipped him. Britt laughed again, pushed his horse closer and flipped out a long, left arm. Obe's hat spun off his head. Britt kept his horse crowding in, forcing Widdens' mount to give ground and all Widdens' could do was snarl like a furious dog.

"Knew it, Obe, knew it all the time," jibed Britt. "There's a lot more saffron than there is salt in you. Go back to your master and let him pet your head."

Obe's nervous horse whirled of its own accord and Britt, snatching his quirt from the saddle horn, lashed the animal across the haunches. The horse exploded in a wild leap and for the moment all Obe Widdens could do was bend every effort to staying in the saddle. By the time he fought the horse under control he was back where he started from and Britt Larkin, cantering after him, was facing Jesse Schell and Alec Creager. And smiling at Marty Creager.

"Well, Jesse?" drawled Britt. "Hello, Alec. Evening, Marty. Come to welcome these good folks to Reservation Valley, maybe?"

"You were always a giddy fool!" barked Alec Creager crustily.

Britt smiled, watching Jesse Schell. "Lacking a sense of humor, Alec, you've missed a lot of life," he murmured.

A cloud of dark anger held Jesse Schell. "Back along the mountain road, Larkin," he gritted, "I told you to stay around the edges. Now—"

"Now I'm right in the middle of things," cut in Britt. "By choice. You know, Jesse, if the Lord had wanted you to own the world, He wouldn't have bothered to clutter up the trails with ordinary mortals—like me."

"I can ride you down," stormed Schell. "I can push you clear out of the mountains. I can—"

"Start ridin', Jesse," cut in Britt again. "I know you've been playing that idea for a long time. Now is as good a time as any to demonstrate. Start pushin'!"

Britt was smiling again, but his eyes were wintry as a blizzard. To the scowling Alec Creager and to his bare-headed daughter, Britt Larkin loomed bigger in his saddle than they had ever seen him before. He seemed to tower over Jesse Schell, despite the latter's physical bulk. And though smiling, at the moment Britt Larkin was wickedly dangerous, rash and uncompromising.

Jesse Schell stirred restlessly in his saddle, as though readying himself to accept Britt Larkin's blunt challenge. Alec Creager spoke quickly.

"Steady, Jesse! That wouldn't help our purpose a bit. Let's not make it a pair of fools, where one is already one too many Larkin, I want a talk with you."

"Later, Alec, later! Right now I'm waitin' for good old Jesse, here to make up his mind. He jumps, or he doesn't jump. Which is it going to be, Jesse?"

A voice behind Britt—Cass Partee's voce—said, "Just to straighten out any question about the beef we got in the fire pit, here's the hide. Also, a bill of sale. We bought the beef from Matt Filchock. Take a look!"

Cass Partee dropped a green steer hide on the ground where the firelight shone on it. He spread it out. Plain to see was Matt Filchock's Box M F brand.

"You don't have to show anybody anything, Cass," said Britt Larkin. "These are not monarchs of the world. They just think they are."

"We don't want trouble," Cass Partee said quietly. "We'll go a long way to avoid trouble."

"Then you'll travel a long way from Reservation Valley!" exploded Jesse Schell harshly.

BRITT LARKIN waited for Partee's answer to this. Maybe he had made a fool of himself, going out on a limb this way for these nester folk. If they caved on him now, it would show he'd made a fool of himself.

"That," said Cass Partee, "is something we're not going to do. We're staying. That —is final!"

Oake Calloway's voice boomed. "When Cas Partee says that, he's speakin' for all of us."

"I can ride you down!" yelled Jesse Schell.

"Shut up, Jesse!" crackled Britt Larkin. "And change the tune. That one is getting tiresome. Right now you're riding nobody down."

"Yeah, Jesse, take it easy," put in Alec Creager harshly. "Threats don't mean a thing."

While all this byplay had been going on, Creager's glance had been running over the nester camp; and he saw men pushing women and children out of the way behind wagons. He also could see men standing in the shadow of the wagons and, by the way they handled themselves, he knew that they had picked up weapons and were ready for anything. Jesse Schell's blindly arrogant anger could push this situation into a blood bath.

Alec Creager said, "Take your men and go home, Jesse. You're in no fit mind for a deal of this kind tonight."

Schell whirled on him. 'You too? Do you think I'm yellow?"

"Go on home," said Creager again. "I'm tellin' you, Jesse."

Schell licked his lips, his eyes glittering with stormy tumult. The man was beside himself with frustrated fury. Britt Larkin waited tensely for the explosion he was sure would come. So he was completely amazed when Schell swung his horse, applied spurs and raced away, his bitter call echoing back:

Marty aimed a slashing blow at Britt Larkin's face (CHAP. VII)

"Come on, Running S!"

Sullenly his men followed him, Obe Widdens riding with his round, bony malignant head twisted, giving Britt Larkin a final hate filled glance.

Britt listened to the departing hoofs, then looked at Alec Creager. "That was good judgment, Alec. Don't tell me you've had a change of heart?"

"Not one little bit," growled Creager. "But I got common sense. This could have turned out bad."

"Only," retorted Britt coolly, "if you and Schell wanted it so. If this thing ever gets bad it will be for the same reason."

Britt swung his horse around, looked over the silent, watching nesters. "You folks might as well go along with your good time. Cass, I'll be around to see you in the morning."

"Fair enough, Britt," was the quiet answer. "And thanks. Matt Filchock was right!"

BRITT looked at Alec Creager. "Now, shall we have that talk?"

Creager jerked his head. "Come on!"

He reined away and Britt fell in beside him. Marty Creager, silent through it all, rode on the other side of her father. The Shield and Cross hands dropped in behind and after a little way, Creager turned to them.

"If you boys want to spend a few hours in town, fly to it," he said.

It was both hint and command and the riders, only too glad to agree, spurred away at an angle. Creager growled, "Now we can get down to business. Just why do you persist in making a prime fool of yourself, Larkin? You want to set gunsmoke to rolling all across this country?"

"Why, no," answered Britt. "I've no liking for gunsmoke."

"You seemed to be doing your level best to start it rolling tonight. If I hadn't happened to be along with Jesse, there's no telling what would have happened. You know that, don't you?"

Britt shrugged. "Jesse would have ranted and raved and shouted, but in the end he would have backed down. Good old Jesse! I can read him like a book. He takes himself to be a great man. He's not. He is," said Britt, with deliberate, biting emphasis, "a pig-headed, over-bearing, greedy, conscienceless coyote. And I'm doggoned if I can see how you stomach him."

"That's pretty strong talk," snapped Creager. "I'm wondering if you've ever said as much to his face."

FOR the first time Marty Creager spoke. "I'm wondering the same." Her voice was scornful. "It's easy to talk behind another man's back."

In the dark, Britt's smile went a little hard, bitter and sardonic. "You don't always have to speak your opinion of another man aloud, even to his face, yet he understands how you feel. I think Jesse understood my complete sentiments, tonight. If he didn't, I'll see that he does, next time I meet up with him. That—should satisfy everybody. Is that all you wanted to talk about, Alec?"

"Hardly. You made a play tonight I can't figure out. Let's concede you got no use for Jesse Schell. That's your business. Just like it's mine and Marty's business if we want to be fond of him. But what I want to know is this. Did you take that stand back there tonight because you've fallen in love with a flock of blasted nesters, or because you just wanted to raise a fuss with Jesse Schell and me?"

"Not the first," answered Britt slowly. "Though there were some of those folks it wouldn't be hard to like. And not part of the last. I never have and never will want a fuss with you, Alec. As for Jesse Schell, any time I can tie a knot in his tail, it will be a pleasure."

"I find you a little hard to understand, Larkin," grumbled Creager. "You never shaped up as tough before. Yet I got to admit, you sat pretty tall in the saddle, back there."

"A man," drawled Britt, "can get tired of being pushed around by strut and bully-puss."

"If you were set on calling Jesse, why did you wait until tonight to do it? It ain't going to help our cause with the nesters, advertising a fuss between ourselves."

"Our cause?" murmured Britt. "Just what is our cause, Alec?"

"Why, the cause every sensible cowman always sticks to. Keep nesters on the jump and never let 'em light."

"In that case," said Britt. "I guess I'm not a sensible cowman."

Alec Creager set his horse up short.

"You mean you're not aimin' to help Jesse and me get rid of that nester tribe?"

"I mean just that. I haven't got a thing against those folks down on Beaver Flats. They got every legitimate right in the world to be there. Jesse Schell doesn't own that land. You don't. I don't. It's Government land, open to homesteading. I'm glad to see those folks there. I hope they stick. They can do us a lot of good."

"Now," growled Creager, "I know you're crazy. I always figgered you as flighty, but I never thought you were quite this loco. Jesse was right. He said all along we could never depend on you."

"Good old Jesse!" murmured Britt sardonically. "And so wise!"

"Oh, Dad, why do you even argue with him?" burst out Marty Creager. "He stood up for the nesters tonight, didn't he? Well, I guess that should tell you all you want to know."

Britt turned on her, stung out of his drawling, mocking mood. "What would you have had me do—sit by and let that treacherous whelp of an Obe Widdens ride down one of those women or kids? Or crawl in front of that self-appointed master of all creation—Jesse Schell? You're right, my dear, I'll side with decent nesters any time before I will a pair like Schell and Widdens. But I'll do this. If your father can show me just one way where those nesters ever have or ever will hurt him or me in any way, then I'll go back to Beaver Flats and run them out, all by myself. But it will have to be a proven hurt, not imaginary."

"Marty's right," growled Alec Creager. "There's no use going any further with this. I just wanted to be sure where you stood, Larkin. Now I know."

"A man has to stand where his conscience and his common sense tell him to stand," said Britt. "I don't want to be at outs with you folks. You're an entirely different breed than Schell, Alec. You're different from him in every way except one. But you're just as blind as he is on this nester question—though for different reasons. Don't let Schell talk you into anything you'll be sorry for, Alec."

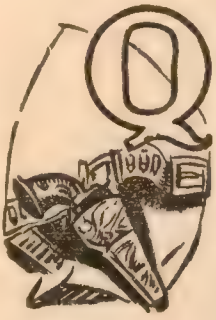
"I'll take care of myself, thank you." The grizzled, frosty browed old cattleman was as distant as the stars. He turned to his daughter. "We'll be ridin' on from here—alone, Marty."

Britt touched his hat to the girl. "Goodnight, folks."

Neither of them answered him.

CHAPTER IV

A Debt to Pay



QUIETLY Britt sat his saddle quietly, listening to the hoofs drift away into the night. He built and lighted a cigarette. The glow of the sulphur match as he held it, cupped in his hands, picked out the lean, hard planes of his face, fashioned them into a mask of tight lipped bronze. His brows had pinched down, his eyes gone stormy.

He had wanted the good opinion of Alec and Marty Creager. He still wanted it, but not at the price of crawling on his hands and knees to them, nor of backing up in front of Jesse Schell's swaggering arrogance. He wasn't a poodle dog, to be brought to heel with a snap of the finger, nor could he toss aside his own conscience or conception of what was right or wrong.

There was quality in the Creagers. Old Alec was a scrupulously honest, ordinarily a fair-minded man but he was of the old school, with some of the blind spots of the old-line cattleman—particularly in regard to nesters and some of the newer ideas of quality, rather than quantity, in cattle. He was jealous of what he regarded as the God-given rights of a cattleman and ready to fight for them at the drop of a hat.

There was no one else, thought Britt, quite like Marty Creager. No one else could compare with her fine, swift grace, the beauty of her red gold head in the sunshine, her pride and immaculateness of spirit. But she was blindly devoted to her father and his opinions were her opinions. And why neither of them could see through the crude, heavy brutishness that lay in Jesse Schell, was hard for Larkin to understand.

Britt sat there in the wide night, thinking on these things, until his cigarette was smoked out. Then, in sudden decision, he pointed his horse's head for Fort Cord.

Fort Cord was a weather-beaten sign post along the trail of empire. Back in the days of the Modoc Indian war, Fort Cord had been a teeming busy military post and headquarters. From it United States cavalry had ridden many tough, dangerous missions, some of them leading far down across the California border, into the lava beds hideouts where the Modocs hived up after striking with swift, deadly raids along the wild frontier. But with the subjugation of the Modocs, Fort Cord lost its importance, the military had moved out and turned back the wide miles of reservation lands to the frontier.

The trail led into the lower end of the street. Britt Larkin rode slowly the length of it, wondering where he'd find Len Revis. He knew Len was still in town, else he'd have met up with him along the trail. Len might still be trading range gossip with Henry Castro at the general store, or be up at the Guidon maybe, sitting into a few hands of two-bit limit stud poker. Britt decided to try the store first.

He dismounted and tied at the hitchrail in front of the place and caught Henry Castro just in the act of closing up for the night. Henry Castro was a short, round faced man, blunt and acid in his comment.

"Where you been, that you don't know?" he snapped, in answer to Britt's question.

Britt stiffened. "Don't know what?"

"Why, that Jesse Schell beat Len Revis half to death. With his fists—rough and tumble. Enough to make a dog sick. Len's an old man, alongside of Schell, and outweighed by a good thirty pounds. Schell handled him wicked."

"Where's Len now?" Britt's question was tight and thin.

"Up at Sam Garfield's hotel. I helped Hack Dinwiddie take Len up there and put him to bed. Sam's Missis is doctorin' Len up. Nothin' busted, she says. But Len's got a week in bed ahead of him."

"When and where did this take place?" asked Britt.

"Not over half an hour ago, up in front of the Guidon. Schell and his crowd had just ridden in to town. They bumped into Len just coming out. I don't know what led up to the fracas. I guess there must've been some words, first. Then Schell went to work on Len. That guy Jesse Schell is two thirds jungle ape. What you goin' to do about it, Larkin? Len is one of your men."

"I'll see Len, first," answered Britt.

SAM GARFIELD'S hotel was one wing of what had been the old military barracks, the rest of which had been made into a warehouse and the stage company's headquarters. Britt Larkin met up with Hack Dinwiddie at the hotel door. Hack Dinwiddie was a tremendous man, bear-powerful but slow and ponderous. Hack, ordinarily the best natured soul in the world, was scowling darkly.

"Where's Len?" asked Britt.

Hack Dinwiddie jerked his shock head toward a door. "In there. That feller Schell! I'm going over to the Guidon to have a talk with him."

"You wait a minute, Hack," Britt told him grimly. "As Len's boss that's my chore. I want to see Len, first. Then we'll go over to the Guidon."

Sam and Mrs. Garfield were with Len, who was in bed. Len's gaunt face was a sight, puffed and swollen out of shape, black with bruises. Both eyes were swollen shut. Mrs. Garfield was mixing some kind of a poultice to put on the swelling. Britt leaned over the bed.

"How you feeling, Len?"

Len Revis stirred. "Britt!" he mumbled. His battered lips twisted in what was meant for a smile, but was just a grimace. "Like I'd been run over by a stage. Tough hombre, Jesse Schell. Too young and strong—for me. Should've kept my mouth shut. I'll be up and around tomorrow."

"You'll be up and around in a week—if you're lucky, Len Revis," reproved stout, kindly Mrs. Garfield, moving in with her bandages and poultice mixture. "Britt, you get out of here. If you must talk, talk to Sam."

Britt took hold of one of Len's gaunt paws, which lay outside the covers, gripped it tightly. "We ain't very big, Len, not as cow outfits go, but we stick together. Do as Mrs. Garfield says, and I'll be seeing you tomorrow."

As he left the room, Britt drew Sam Garfield with him. "Len ain't a trouble hunter, nor yet a fool, Sam. How did it get started?"

"This is only how I heard it," said Sam. "For some reason, Jesse Schell was wicked mad when he hit town—at you. When he

bumped into Len, Schell started blackguarding you and Len called him a liar. That set things off."

"I see, Sam. Thanks!"

As Britt turned away, Sam caught him by the arm. "Now don't you go get in a mess. Schell's got most of his crew with him. He's in an ugly temper."

Britt's smile was thin, mirthless, cold. "I'm in quite a temper myself, Sam. I can't think of a better time to educate Jesse Schell."

Hack Dinwiddie was waiting outside, prowling restlessly up and down. Hack was a man of peace until his temper got the best of him. Now that first hot edge of temper was wearing off. He rumbled, a hint of doubt in his voice:

"I been thinkin', Britt. Mebbe we better not make more trouble."

"Never think at a time like this, Hack," cut in Britt. "Just act."

Britt headed for the Guidon, walking fast. Big Hack lumbered along behind him. Running S saddle broncs made a dark group along the hitchrail out front. A smaller group of four horses stood further along, belonging, no doubt, to the Shield and Cross riders Alec Creager had allowed to come to town. These things Britt noted mechanically, shadows along the outer fringes of the coldly bitter purpose which gripped him.

The breath of the saloon was hot and smoky in his face when he entered. The bar was well filled, with Jesse Schell looming big and thick-bodied in the center of things. Nearest the door stood the four Shield and Cross riders, one of them Tom Alden, the Shield and Cross foreman. He was a spare, gaunt faced man, a little grizzled, his eyes and face just now harsh and saturnine and unreadable. He turned his head as Britt Larkin entered. His eyes flickered and then he kept on turning until his back was to the bar and his elbows braced against it, so he could watch the room and all that went on within it.

BRITT moved straight on toward Jesse Schell. Obe Widdens stood two places removed from Schell, on this side. Britt had to pass Obe and put his back partially to the man, when he came close up to Schell. Jesse had not noticed Britt's entrance, but one of his men had. At a low growled warning, Jesse turned.

Len Revis had got in a few licks. One corner of Schell's mouth was swollen and there was a dark bruise well up under his left eye. With two jerks, Britt had unbuckled his gun belt and, as it sagged free in his hand, he said thinly:

"Take yours off, Jesse. This is for Len Revis!"

Schell, startled momentarily, just stared. Then he said, "Ah!" His big hands were almost violent as he tugged at the buckle of his gun belt.

Obe Widdens, his flat, hard glance on Britt Larkin's back rubbed the palms of his hands across the front of his shirt and started to sidle away from the bar. But a hand settled on his elbow, forcing him back.

"Now, now, Obe!" a curt voice said. "Let's you and me just watch this!"

Widdens twisted his bullet head and found himself looking into the eyes of Tom Aden, the Shield and Cross foreman.

CHAPTER V

Good Earth—Sweet Water

ON FOOT, face to face, Britt Larkin and Jesse Schell were of a height. But the weight advantage was all with Jesse. He was thick and burly where Britt was lean and spare, and he put all his faith in his bulk and power. He came at Britt with a rush, fists low, wrists hooked, aiming to smash Britt in the stomach.

Britt shot his hands out, drove them, pushing, into the crooks of Jesse's half bent elbows and so smothered the punches before they could fully start. He let the power and weight of Jesse's rush carry him back across the room. Then suddenly he stiffened and pivoted and let Jesse spin past him to crash into a card table, which went wildly skittering. Discomfited and cursing at having his first rush so neatly smothered and out-maneuvered, Jesse came around, an open target.

Britt was waiting, set. He hit Jesse in the mouth with a punch that had the full lift and roll of his shoulders behind it. It

stopped Jesse, shook him up and made a mess of his mouth. And it drove him berserk.

It was, thought Britt bleakly, like trying to stave off and stop the charge of a maddened grizzly bear. On a sheer weight and strength basis, he couldn't hope to match Jesse Schell. All he could do was try and keep away and shoot in punches when and where he could. He hit Schell until he lost all count of how many blows went home. He hit him until his fists and wrists and arms grew heavy and numb. And still Schell came after him, everlastingly after him.

Once when Schell partially cornered him, Britt ducked, crowded in close and one clawing sweep of Schell's hand stripped his shirt off him as though it were tissue paper. Then Schell's clubbed fists pounded like post mauls on Britt's back and over his kidneys, hurting savagely and deep inside.

Britt had to get away from that sort of thing and he whirled and drove furiously. Schell tried to loop a thick arm around Britt's neck and Britt barely pulled clear before the stricture locked tight. It felt like his ears had been scraped off his head when he finally jerked free.

Britt threw another punch that made still more of a mess of Jesse Schell's face and stopped him for a precious moment. But Britt knew now that he had taken on more than he could handle. He had let outraged anger override sound judgment. He had landed the best punches he knew how on this bull of a man in front of him. He had pounded Schell's face to a pulp, but he had not really hurt him. And with fists alone he could never hope to beat him down.

But he had made the issue one of fists and it would have to go through that way. He knew what was coming to him and he set his jaw grimly to take it. He got it.

Those terrible smashes across the kidneys had drained strength from him, taken the fine edge of resilience off his coordination. He felt clumsy, slow, futile. Right after that Jesse got home his first solid punch to the head. Britt saw it coming, but he didn't have speed enough to get out of the way. The impact knocked him spinning, half way across the room. His knees were water and when they collided with an overturned chair, went out from under him, and he rolled under a card table.

Jesse Schell spat a mouthful of blood, plunged after Britt, aiming a savage kick. Dazed and sick, the world roaring and spinning crazily about him, Britt was struggling to get back to his feet. The lift of his shoulder tipped the table toward Schell and that was all that kept that wicked kick from landing. Schell grabbed the heavy table, threw it aside and lunged forward again.

Britt had his feet under him. He threw an instinctive, desperate punch that brought another spatter of blood from Schell's pulped lips. But it didn't stop Schell and Schell's clawing hands settled on Britt's naked shoulders. He lifted Britt clear off his feet and threw him. But Hack Dinwiddie caught Britt, and kept him from smashing head first into the bar.

Big Hack pushed Britt aside and met Schell's following rush with the broad of his wide chest.

"Enough!" growled Hack. "You've whipped him, Schell. I'll not stand by and see you break him up!"

SCHELL, raging blindly, tried to knock Hack out of the way, but here was physical bulk and strength which more than matched his own. Hack spun him around, tripped him and sat him on the floor.

"Enough, I said!" roared Hack.

"That's right," put in Tom Aden. "A good place to call it quits. Widdens, get in there and calm Jesse down. You hear me! And remember, I never use my fists except to hold a gun. Hack, get Larkin out of here!"

When Hack Dinwiddie pushed him aside, Britt had gone down flat. Now he was up on one knee, shaking his head, trying to get the fog out of it. Hack growled, "Thanks, Tom." Hack turned, pulled Britt to his feet and carried him, more than led him out into the street.

Britt had no idea where Hack was taking him, nor did he care. His feet wouldn't track and his eyes wouldn't, either. Breath rasped out of him in a harsh gasping. His lungs and throat seemed raw and the taste in his throat was salty, like blood. The freshness of the outer air helped some, but he was still little more than half conscious when he was pushed back on to a bunk and Hack

Dinwiddie's deep voice was telling him to lie quiet.

Half an hour's time made a big difference. By that time Britt was sitting up so Hack could help him into a new shirt. Hack had taken him to his own cabin out back of the blacksmith shop. There was a knock on the door and Tom Aden announced himself. At Hack's summons, Aden came in. Looped over one arm was Britt's belt and gun.

"I'd guess," said Aden tersely, "that sometime in the future you may be needing this. You were a fool."

"Maybe," mumbled Britt through swollen lips.

The hint of a twinkle showed in Tom Aden's frosty eyes. "Any man's a fool who tries to use his fists on a grizzly bear. That's what guns were made for."

Britt relaxed slightly. "You may be right. Much obliged for bringing the gun over. But I don't quite understand. I'm the most unpopular cattleman in these parts—with other cattlemen."

Tom Aden laid gun and belt on the cabin table, built a cigarette. His face was as hard and saturnine as ever. He inhaled deeply and turned to leave, pausing a moment in the cabin door to drop a word of explanation.

"I saw what Jesse Schell did to Len Revis," he said. "I've always liked Len. Tonight, I even liked you."

Then he was gone, the door closing behind him.

"Tom's deep, and nobody's fool," rumbled Hack Dinwiddie. "He kept Obe Widdens off your back when Obe was just honin' to move in and grab himself a bite when you weren't looking. Well, satisfied now that there are limits to who you can lick?"

Britt's grin was a grimace which hurt his whole face. "I'm satisfied that I got licked," he admitted. "But, maybe so, one of these days I'll give it another whirl. Anyhow, I wrung some of the water out of him."

"Some," agreed Hack drily. "But not enough, not near enough. Jesse's going to be hard to live with from now on, Britt."

Britt stood up, began walking back and forth. "Never hurt in so many places before in my life. But one way and another I feel better than I did before the lightening struck. At least I did something tonight I've had a hankering to do for a long time. I put my fist in Jesse's face. Thanks for everything, Hack. You're a skookum white man."

"Hey!" exclaimed Hack, as Britt started for the door, "You're not figuring to ride home tonight, are you? You're plenty welcome to my spare bunk."

Britt paused to buckle on his gun, shaking it down into place. "Got things to start doing, bright and early tomorrow morning. Be seeing you, Hack. Thanks again."

Going down to the hitchrail in front of Henry Castro's store, where he had left his horse, Britt noted that the group of Running S riding stock still stood before the Guidon, and he thought that maybe he'd wrung a little more water out of Jesse Schell than Hack Dinwiddie figured he had. At any rate, Jesse wasn't feeling up to riding just now.

Britt held his mount to a slow pace along the home trail until the stiffness

[*Turn page*]

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that had settled across his kidneys began to work out. Then he lifted the pace to a fast jog. From the first elevation of the foothills he looked down across the flats and saw that all was dark there, now. The nester camp was settled for the night.

He was well up in the chill black shadow of the timber when he heard the Running S coming up behind but the turn-off was close at hand and he was past this when the Running S came to it and took it and the pound of hoofs grew muffled and faded out to the northwest. As always, they were riding hard. That was Jesse Schell's way; he had no mercy on either men or horses.

AT MID-MORNING the next day, Britt Larkin rode up to the nester camp for a second time in twenty-four hours. Aside from a swollen lip and a dark bruise on the left side of his face, he looked his usual self. But he was stiff and sore from head to toe for most of his bruises were covered by his clothes.

The nester wagons still stood as they had the night before. They seemed to be resting up for a future still in doubt. Either that or they were keeping things bunched in case of attack by cattle interests. Britt inquired for Cass Partee and was directed, civilly enough, along the flat. He found the young nester helping Oake Calloway cold shoe a team of horses.

A tub of laundry was boiling and steaming over a nearby fire, tended by Rose Calloway. She straightened as Britt rode up, brushed a wisp of hair back from her face and smiled at Britt. She was pretty, all right, with a grave, steady sweetness in her eyes and about her mouth. Britt touched his hat to her as he swung from the saddle and walked over to Cass Partee, who looked at him keenly.

"I hope your trouble didn't come because of us folks, Britt," he said.

Britt touched his bruised face, grinned and shrugged. "Not at all. This was over something that's been stewing in the pot for a long time."

"From what I've seen over the space of a few hours, I'd say that it would be mighty difficult for any self-respecting man to live in these parts very long without coming to trouble with that Schell hombre," growled Oake Calloway shrewdly. "There's one feller who sure pushes the fur of the cat the wrong way."

"Jesse is quite a problem, for a fact," admitted Britt briefly. "When you men finish with that chore, I got a proposition to talk over. No rush, though."

Britt squatted on his heels and built a cigarette. He knew that all around him a number of people were watching him. He saw grim, truculent old Sod Tremper stalk stiffly by. The old squatter's eyes burned with dislike and suspicion and Britt knew that Tremper was still unconvinced of his friendliness.

A small, tow-headed girl of six or seven was not so critical, however. She came sidling up, watching Britt with bright, round childish eyes. Her hair was braided into pig tails so tight they stuck out from her little head like prongs. Britt grinned at her and she was all confusion, eyes down cast, digging her bare toes into the ground and wriggling like an ingratiating puppy. Britt made a mental note that the next time he was in town, he'd raid Henry Castro's candy case.

Cass Partee and Oake Calloway finished their horse shoeing chore and come over to Britt, who straightened and said, "Let's take a little walk."

He led them away from the camp and out into the tall sage.

"Maybe you've noticed," Britt said, "That sage is like everything else that grows in the earth, it responds to good soil. Oh, it will grow in sand and in shallow, rocky, hungry soil, too, but it is scrawny and stunted in such places. The fact that it grows so tall and thick here shows it has its roots into mighty good earth. Clear this sage out of here and put water on the soil and a man could grow anything."

"That adds up to considerable of a chore," said Oake Calloway, "clearing this sage. And where would the water come from?"

Britt pointed to the east, where Reservation Valley narrowed and lost itself in a tangle of low, looping hills. "Back there the Saber River breaks through a spine of rock which runs pretty much north and south, a gorge you can toss a rock across. Where it comes out of the gorge the river jumps off maybe sixty or seventy feet high. The Indians called the falls, White Thunder. From the top of the falls down

here into the valley is a steady even slope. It wouldn't take much of a dam at the far end of the gorge to put a steady head of water in an irrigation ditch, and that water on this soil would do wonders."

"It's a chore that gets bigger by the minute," said Calloway, drily doubtful. "There'd be a mite of ditch to be dug, several miles of it, as I see distance. Which would take money and labor—a heap of both."

"The miles aren't as long as you think," Britt said. "There's a gulch—you can't see it from here—but it is there. It works its way along the north slope of the valley and heads up blind within less than a hundred feet of the river above the gorge. A ten-foot dam above the gorge, a cut through to the head of the gulch and the gulch would deliver water to within a mile and a half of where we are standing, right now. You'd have to dig that much ditch, no more."

BRITT could see that Oake Calloway was still doubtful.

"See here," Britt went on. "You folks have made your say that you intend to stay here. Whether you do or not is going to depend on several things. The biggest of these is just how much you put of yourselves into real development. A tar paper shanty and maybe half an acre of sod broken and in garden truck never gave any man a real feeling of permanence. That's why squatters, despite good intentions, are always on the move; they never set their roots deep enough to hold. Also, I doubt that any squatter ever won his fight against cattle interests determined to oust him, unless he has the law to back him up, and to get the law really interested, you've got to show it more than that tar paper shanty. For despite all idealistic theory, the law is hardly apt to decide in favor of a transient in a tar paper shack against a cattle outfit that is dug in and permanent. The minds of men just don't run that way."

Cass Partee, listening intently, nodded vehemently. "That is truth, if I ever heard it spoken," he declared. "You make me see things, Britt."

"I'll make you see more, Cass. I'll make you see feed corrals, set up on these flats, with my cattle topping off the last ounce of fat on alfalfa and corn that you grow. I'll make you see feeding stations set up at regular intervals between Fort Cord and the shipping corrals on the railroad at Button Willow, with the feed supplied by the fat acres we stand on now. Almost a partnership you might call it between yourselves and the cattle interests from the Royales."

"So far there's been just one of those cattlemen who can look at us and not curse us," reminded Oake Calloway. "That one is you. We'd need others to make this deal pay."

"A cattleman," said Britt, "thinks in terms of cattle, feed and water. He'll not fight and destroy anything which will provide either the feed or the water—not in the long run, he won't. For too long he has thought of the squatter in terms of that tar paper shanty and nothing more. Show him where you can benefit him by being around and you'll have a friend in him."

"I don't believe this fellow Jesse Schell could ever be brought to that point of view," declared Oake Calloway bluntly.

"No, he never could," Britt admitted. "But he is just one. Alec Creager is the big cattle influence in the Royales. Whichever way Alec Creager goes, that is the way all the other outfits will go, with the exception of Schell. He'll make a fight of it, but it will be a lone one, with no chance of success, once you get the rest on your side."

"It will take money," said Oake Calloway. "We could supply the labor, but there is little money amongst us."

"I've got some of that and Alec Creager has a lot more, once we get him convinced—and I think we can," declared Britt. "Anyway, you got something to think about and talk over with the rest of your people."

"We'll talk," said Cass Partee eagerly. "We'll talk—strong. This is it, Oake. Britt has drawn a picture of a real future for us."

Oake Calloway had been staring out to the east along the valley, his strong, gaunt face sober with forming visions. He nodded slowly.

"Ay!" he rumbled. "A future!"

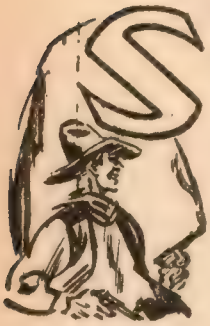
He was turning as he spoke, but his words broke sharply off as something snapped ominously through the still, warm air. Oake Calloway reeled and, even as he

fell, there was a bright gush of crimson streaming down the side of his face.

Back to the north, deep along the rising slope of the valley, a rifle cracked thinly.

CHAPTER VI

An Understanding



SPRAWLED in a heap, Oake Calloway lay like a dead man. Britt Larkin thought he was dead, even as he dropped to his knees beside the stricken squatter. Cass Partee stood still, too dead and startled to move.

"Down, Cass!" rapped Britt. "Down out of sight! They may try again!"

Cass dropped on a knee, staring stupidly at Oake Calloway. The high sage hid them completely and when that distant rifle cracked twice more, the lead landed wide and without effect. Britt turned Oake Calloway over, the squatter limp as a rag. But when Britt felt of the stricken man's heart, he found it still beating. Britt gave a gasp of relief, ripped off his neckerchief and wadded it against the wound.

"He's dead!" mumbled Cass. "Oake's dead. This will break Rose's heart!"

"He's not dead," growled Britt. "Steady his head while I get some kind of bandage in place. That slug creased him and I don't think too deep. I need some help. Give a hand!"

Britt knotted his neckerchief in place. "We got to get him back to camp. Grab his feet!"

Britt locked his hands under Oake Calloway's arms and with Cass Partee helping, began carrying the squatter back to camp. Britt expected every moment to hear more lead come whipping around, but there was none and the only sound was that of panting breath and crackling sage as he and Cass pushed through with their limp burden.

They broke out of the sage and into the clearing of the flats. Rose Calloway saw them, stood for a moment like a statue, one hand pressed against her throat. Then she came flying toward them. "Dad!" she cried. "Dad!"

"Somebody way back in the sage took a shot at us," explained Britt gently. "They creased your father. I don't believe he's too bad hurt. If you'll get some blankets ready, we'll put him to bed."

She ran for the wagons and, when Britt and Cass Partee got there with their burden, had a thick pad of blankets spread. They lowered Oake Calloway on to these.

"Bring some hot water and a little whisky, if anybody has some," Britt said.

By this time other squatters came hurrying from all directions, gathering in a still, hard faced circle. With Rose Calloway helping, Britt washed the blood from Oake Calloway's head and face. Rose Calloway, pale but steady and deft of hand, now, examined the wound carefully.

"He'll be all right," she said in that soft, clear way of hers. "I know he will."

"Good girl!" applauded Britt.

She bandaged her father's head with some clean white cloth and let it gently down on the blankets. Cass Partee had gone in search of whisky. At this moment Britt Larkin felt a hand settle on his holstered gun and before he could prevent it the weight of the gun was lifted away.

Britt came up and around, found himself staring into the muzzle of his own gun. Holding it and staring at him with hard, hot eyes was old Sod Tremper, who hated all cattlemen so fanatically.

"And what's that for?" demanded Britt.

"I said from the first you were a sneakin' spy," charged Tremper bitterly. "You with your smooth talk and that little show you put on last night just to fool the folks! This shows I was right. You tolled Oake Calloway out into the sage where some friend of yours could dry-gulch him. Yeah, you fooled some, but you don't fool me. You stay right there and mind your moves, else you get what Calloway got, only nearer center. And if Calloway dies, I'll see that you're hung with your own rope to the nearest tree."

Sod Tremper's talk was far-fetched and without an ounce of truth, of course, but Britt, looking around the circle of squatters was startled to note a good many heads nodding agreement with Tremper.

"That's all a lot of nonsense, of course," said Britt curtly, "saying that I led Oake Calloway out into the sage so somebody

could shoot at him. It is more than likely the shot was meant for me, instead of Calloway."

Sod Tremper spat. "Oake was the one who was hit. That's all that concerns us."

From her knees beside her father, Rose Calloway said, "You're acting foolish, Mr. Tremper. Mr. Larkin is telling the truth."

CASS PARTEE came hurrying up with a small flask of whisky. At a glance he saw how things were.

"Put that gun away, Sod!" he rapped. "What's the big idea, anyhow?"

"The old wolf is convinced I took you and Oake Calloway out into the sage so some friend of mine could massacre you," said Britt drily.

"I'll believe different when I hear Oake Calloway say it with his own lips," asserted Tremper stubbornly. "And if he never does, why then there'll be that rope and the tree."

"Don't argue with him, Cass," said Britt. "He'll get over it."

They got a little of the whisky down Oake Calloway's throat. The grizzled squatter stirred, groaned and opened his eyes. They gave him another mouthful of the liquor and he lifted a hand and touched his head.

"What happened?" he mumbled. "What hit me?"

Now that she saw life stirring in her father again, Rose Calloway's eyes filled with tears and her soft lips trembled.

Cass Partee said, "Don't you remember, Oake? We were out in the sage, talking over future plans with Larkin. Somebody took a long range shot at us. They creased you. You'll be all right. Take another drag at this flask."

Calloway shook his head weakly. "I'll settle for water. Yeah, I remember, now."

Sod Tremper stepped forward and leaned over Calloway. "I'm claiming that this feller Larkin got you out there deliberate so some cowman friend of his could get a clear shot at you, Oake. I claim he's a spy!"

A faint, grim smile touched Oake Calloway's lips. "You mean well, Sod, but you're an old fool. Britt Larkin will probably turn out to be the best friend any of us ever had. I can't blame you for packin' the long hate you do, knowing the cause of it, but in this case your judgment is all wrong. Now I want to sleep. Things are still going round and round!"

Sod Tremper hesitated, still hard jawed and scowling, then stepped over and gave Britt Larkin's gun back to him. "I said I'd be guided by what Oake said. Mebbe I was wrong this time. But I never did trust a cow man, and I never will."

Britt dropped the gun back into the holster. "Never is a long time, Tremper. We'll see."

He turned to Cass Partee. "I'll leave it to you to start selling the big idea to these folks, Cass. Right now I'm going to do a little scouting. I still think that shot was intended for me, instead of Oake Calloway."

He looked at Rose Calloway, tipped his hat. "You're the pure quill, ma'am. I can't tell you how happy I am that your father wasn't hurt worse. I think a day's rest will see him up and around again."

She smiled at him. "I'm sure of it."

Cass Partee accompanied Britt over to his horse. "It may take a little time to get the idea over with some of the folks, Britt, but I'll do my best. In the meantime, you watch yourself. I believe as you do. That shot was intended for you, not for Oake Calloway, because there would be no point in a dry gulcher trying for Oake specifically. If all the gulcher wanted to do was knock over a squatter, there were plenty of targets out in the open flats."

"I got my enemies," admitted Britt. "And a try at drygulching would just fit one of them. If you're smart, Cass, you'll organize some guard shifts and keep somebody on watch all the time. Especially at night. I'll be seeing you."

Four hours later, Britt rode into Fort Cord. In that time he had ridden a lot of country, quartering the foothill slopes above Beaver Flats, trying to pick up some sort of sign that would give him some definite proof of who had fired that shot. But the country was big, the sage was thick and he ended up no wiser than he'd been when he started. So he went to town to see how Len Revis was making it.

LEN'S face looked somewhat better under the ministrations of Mrs. Sam Garfield. But Len admitted he'd been optomistic about being up and around in a day. Len was so stiff and sore he could hardly move.

"That Jesse Schell!" he growled. "He's worse'n a bear. When he hits you he hurts you plumb all the way through. I heard about you tacklin' him over in the Guidon, Britt. You're lucky to be alive. That was a fool thing to do, boy."

Britt grinned. "Put it down that there were two fools, Len. You and me. I got licked, all right. Jesse is a tough 'un, for a fact. Don't you try and rush things. You stay right here until Mrs. Garfield says different. When you're really up to it, you come on home. I won't be in town again for a while. Me and the Dodd boys got quite a chore of work ahead."

When Britt left the hotel he headed for Hack Dinwiddie's blacksmith shop. The clangor of hammer on anvil was beating out a sort of restful melody in the still, warm air. When Britt went into the place Hack was bent over, fitting a shoe to a front hoof of a racy looking sorrel bronc. On an empty horse shoe keg, Marty Creager sat watching Hack work.

She stirred slightly at sight of Britt, gave only a brief nod in response to Britt's quiet, "Hello, Marty."

Hack dropped the sorrel's hoof, stepped over and plunged the hot shoe into the water tub, where it hissed and sizzled. He looked at Britt and said, "How you feelin'?"

Britt grinned. "Don't have to search far to find some sore spots. Just saw Len. We agreed we'd both taken a whopping—that our judgment was poor. Did Len tell you last evening about coming up to the ranch and shoeing up our cavvy herd?"

"Be up tomorrow," nodded Hack. "Had a few jobs to clean up before I left. You must be figgerin' on a lot of ridin' in the near future."

"Quite some. See you tomorrow then, Hack."

Britt went over to Henry Castro's store. The storekeeper was alone, slouched in a round backed chair, reading a tattered newspaper.

He looked up at Britt over the top of his steel rimmed spectacles.

"You must be pretty whangy," he grunted. "After what you took last night, most men would be in bed for a week."

"That's the beauty of having friends, Henry," said Britt cheerfully. "Hack Dinwiddie pulled Jesse off me just when Jesse was really getting set to curry me. How much is my credit good for, and for how long?"

Castro folded the newspaper and dropped it beside his chair. "Depends. How much you want, and what for?"

"Well, there'll be giant powder, a lot of it, along with caps and fuse. There'll be picks and shovels, couple of dozen each, sledge-hammers and drills, two or three Fresno scrapers, lumber, nails, a lot of cement and a flock of other odds and ends I can't think of just now."

"Humpth!" growled Castro. "Why don't you ask for my right arm, my shirt and pants and mebbe my back teeth. What kind of a loco idea you playing with now?"

"If you promise not to spread the word, I'll tell you."

"I ain't agreein' to a thing, understand," grumbled Castro. "But I'll listen, and keep my mouth shut."

CHAPTER VII

A Quarrel

BRITT talked and Henry Castro listened. As he got deep into his plan, Britt was walking up and down in enthusiasm. Henry Castro sat utterly still, hands folded across his fat little stomach. When Britt finished, Castro said:

"Only one weak spot. The squatters. They won't stick. Time Jesse Schell and Alec Creager get through pushin' 'em around some, them squatters will flit. Then where'd you be, boy?"

"I'm hoping to swing Alec Creager behind the plan before I get done with him," said Britt. "Alec is no fool. He's stubborn and hard to handle in some ways, but once he sees the benefits it will bring him, I think he'll come around. He's hard headed where a dollar is concerned."

"Mebbe," conceeded Castro. "But Jesse Schell, he'll buck you every foot of the way. He'll rip and tear, Jesse will."

"I expect that," said Britt, a toughening note coming into his tone. "Jesse will get more than he sends. It's high time this

country slapped Jesse down. He's been too big for his britches for a long time."

"Jesse will take considerable slapping down. But darned if I don't like the picture you paint, Britt. It would be a big thing for the valley, was you to put it across. If only I felt them squatters would stick."

"This bunch will, Henry. There's some pretty stout folks among 'em. Call it a reasonable gamble. There's nothing absolutely sure in this world."

Castro polished his spectacles with the corner of a faded bandanna. "Tell you what, Britt. You get even a half-way nod from Alec Creager, I'll throw in with you. I'm tired of seein' nothin' but empty sage brush in Reservation Valley, and good land goin' to waste. I'll go further. If you can get nothin' more out of Alec Creager than just a promise that he won't interfere, I'll go you."

Hoofs thudded softly to a stop before the store, then quick, light steps across the porch. Marty Creager came in.

"Any mail for Shield and Cross, Mr. Castro?" she asked.

"Some, as I recollect, Marty." Castro left his chair and went behind the counter. Britt Larkin slipped out, got his horse and was waiting at the edge of town when Marty Creager came riding by on her way home. Britt dropped his horse in beside her.

"Don't scowl," he drawled. "You're a lot prettier when you smile, Marty."

"The trail," she said stiffly, "is free. But I prefer to ride it, alone."

She would have lifted her sorrel to a run, but Britt leaned over and caught her rein and, when she turned on him furiously, he met her look calmly.

"I'm riding all the way home with you, Marty, because I want to see your father about something. Two or three months ago you wouldn't have objected—you might even have welcomed me along. Why all the sudden change? I haven't robbed any banks, turned horse thief, abused women and children or kicked a crippled dog. Oh, I admit I don't see eye to eye with your dad on the squatter question, but if you'll give me time, maybe I'll have him seeing things my way. In the meantime, why can't we be friends? We used to be at one time."

She looked him up and down with stormy eyes. "Two things are unforgivable in a man. That he be a traitor to his own kind, and that he be a fool."

"The first hasn't been proven, yet," said Britt quietly. "The second—your opinion alone, or that of others, too?"

"The first needs no proof, after last night," she flared. "Nor after your refusing to side with Dad and Jesse Schell in adding your name to the warning posted along the Button Willow road, telling the squatters not to head into Reservation Valley."

"It would do no good, and I knew it," cut in Brett. "I was right, wasn't I? The squatters are here. Now about the fool angle?"

"Only a fool welcomes squatters into cattle country."

"Once," said Britt, "there was a king—a king named Canute. He thought he was so great he could go down to the edge of the sea and order the tide not to come in. He got his feet wet. People are a tide, flowing over the land. I don't figure myself any king, trying to stop the unstoppable. Does that make me a fool?"

"Yes, and a weak one!"

BRITT brought both horses to a halt. There was a limit to a man's patience, to what he could take, even from a girl as handsome and spirited as Marty Creager—no matter how much he admired her, how many dreams he had secretly built about her. His eyes narrowed and he looked at her so intently her glance fell.

"All your life you've been a spoiled darling," said Britt harshly. "The spoiled darling of a doting father and a rich, powerful outfit. You never had to do a lick of work you didn't want to do. Always you've had comfort and security, four stout walls around you and a tight roof over your head. You've never known want, hardship or worry over the future. You've been petted and pampered and admired. You're a smug, headstrong, selfish brat. You're as beautiful as a dream—and twice as useless. There isn't a squatter woman out there in Beaver Flats who isn't worth ten of you. You were right about me being a fool and a weak one—where you're concerned. Because I knew all that from the first, and from the first day I saw you I've been in love with you. That

certainly makes me a weak fool, doesn't it?"

Her face had gone white, then crimson, then white again. She caught at her quirt, her eyes blazing. She aimed a slashing blow at his face. Britt put up his free hand, caught the descending lash, jerked the quirt from her hand.

"I've changed my mind about going to see your father," went on Britt icily. "The next time Alec Creager and I get together is when he comes to see me. And he will, humble and ready to talk sense, before I'm done with things in this valley. In the meantime, tell him to leave those squatter folk alone. Tell him I said so. Tell him I'm making it a special chore of mine to see that they're left alone, by him and Jesse Schell, too. As for you, because I'll probably never have another chance—"

Britt dropped the quirt, leaned, shot out a long, encircling arm. He had her half out of her saddle before she could guess his intent. Then he kissed her, right on her white, furious lips.

She struck at him with a small, gauntleted fist, struck twice and hit him once. Britt laughed, dropped her rein and nudged the jittery sorrel with his toe. The sorrel started to run but the girl set it back to a rearing halt.

"You'll pay for that," she raged. "You'll pay! Dad or Jesse Schell will fix you!"

"We'll see about Jesse," cut in Britt. "Here he comes, now!"

Jesse Schell was alone and riding hard, as he always did, a heavy figure above the sage until the road made its sharp turn and brought him straight toward them. Jesse wasn't seeing too good. One eye was still but a mere slit between puffed, bruised lids. The other was bloodshot and blinking steadily. The rest of Jesse's face was equally battered and bruised and he was anything but a pleasing sight at the moment. Britt thought, with bleak satisfaction, that he had done a better job on Jesse than he realized.

Apparently Schell, because of the sage, the distance and the sifting dust, had not actually seen the brief moment of struggle when Britt had pulled Marty Creager to him and kissed her, but he could see now the white rage that was in the girl, the cool mocking smile on Britt's lips and so read the tension which lay between them.

He swung his head heavily from one to the other, then demanded thickly, past cut and swollen lips, "What goes on here? What's the matter, Marty?"

Britt waited alertly, watching the girl. She started to speak, hesitated, then said, "Nothing. Nothing at all, Jesse. We—just had a few words."

Schell grunted skeptically. "You're mad. You're wild. Something set you off. What was it?"

Marty bit her lips, shook her head. Britt looked at her intently, then said quietly, "Stout youngster. I apologize and take back a lot of things."

He leaned far down from his saddle, caught her quirt up off the ground, then swung his horse over beside the sorrel. "Yours," he said, holding the quirt out to Marty Creager. "Sorry."

SHE took the quirt, shook her reins and the sorrel flattened out in a wild run.

Jesse Schell watched her go, then swung his battered glance back to Britt Larkin. Uncertainty was in Jesse's expression, hostility and jealous anger. "That quirt? Did Marty go to use it on you?"

"Did she?" murmured Britt.

Jesse cursed. "If I knew whether you'd given her just cause, I'd—"

"You'd what?" Britt cut in.

Jesse ground his teeth. "I licked you last night, Larkin. If they hadn't pulled me off you I'd have rid this range forever of a slickery, mealy-mouthed squatter lovin' idiot!"

"Careful, Jesse. That'll be enough out of you. Yeah, you licked me last night. But that was last night. A smart man told me never to try and use my fists on an animal, that guns were made for such a purpose. He was right. So now, here's just you and me. There's no Obe Widdens to back your hand from the dark or anything like that. Just you and me. And a good time and place to settle things. Get off the trail, Jesse!"

"Get off nothin'! I'll ride you down!"

Britt sent his horse lunging ahead, forcing Jesse's panting, lathered mount to swing away. Jesse brought the animal back and around with hard, relentless strength. But there was Britt's horse, rearing a little now, lunging in on him and there was Britt Larkin watching him with a cold, bitter alertness, ready for anything.

"Get off the trail, Jesse!"

Now at last Jesse Schell fully understood. Just the two of them, out here in the lonely sage, all pretense thrown aside, the issue plain and stark. The issue that had always been there, between them, but for the first time brought fully into the open.

Britt Larkin kept forcing his horse in and Jesse's horse was giving way. It was symbolic, forcing a man off a trail. It was settling something, establishing who was the better man. No issue this, of brute strength, but of will and cold courage.

A faint thread of panic ran through Jesse Schell. He hadn't had time to plan this thing, to figure all the angles.

"You crazy fool!" he yelled. "What do you think you're doin'?"

"You been making big talk for a long time," rapped Britt Larkin. "Always going to ride somebody down, always going to do this or that. Now we'll see. I'm making my talk. Get off the trail!"

The panic grew in Jesse Schell. This Britt Larkin meant business, was ready for anything, primed and cocked. In another second or two there could be gun smoke spurting and a dead man in the dust.

Schell's harrassed horse swung off the trail, and Schell let it go this time. He had to—he had to get off the trail or face the ultimate, and he wasn't ready for that.

Britt Larkin pulled his mount to a halt. There was a cold, deadly recklessness in Britt, that came out of him like a current and which Jesse Schell felt the full impact of.

"Now we know, Jesse," said Britt. "You and me know. So, don't ever try and pull your bully-puss and strut on me again. It won't work. Now, get out of here!"

Schell did not argue. His battered face was suffused, his neck thick and swollen with fury. But Britt Larkin was awful tall in the saddle just then, taller than Jesse had ever seen him before, or ever dreamed he could be. Jesse jingled his spurs savagely and went away, his horse lunging and grunting, tearing for town.

Britt watched for a moment then turned and looked off to where only an upflung pillar of dust marked the progress of Marty Creager. Britt built and lighted a cigarette, inhaled deeply and set his own mount to a jog.

CHAPTER VIII

Dark Tides

DILIGENTLY Britt Larkin and the Dodd brothers, Chuck and Harley, rode the limits of Britt's Tin Cup range. They rode the high parks, the timber gulches and the aspen swamps which spread far up against the crest of the Royales. They bunched Tin Cup cattle and headed them down out of the mountains. Within a week, Len Revis joined them, a trifle more thin and gaunt than usual but with most of the visible signs of the beating he had taken at the hands of Jesse Schell now fading out.

It was a dawn to dark chore. Hack Dinwiddie had come up to headquarters and shoed all the cavvy afresh and now these horses earned those new shoes as Britt and his three cattle hands virtually lived in their saddles.

Chuck and Harley Dodd were quiet faced, reliable hands, men of middle age, frugal of speech, expert with horses and cattle. Britt had explained his future plans to them, even before the round up started.

"It will mean that to a certain extent we'll be tied up with the squatters," Britt said. "Which isn't going to be popular in some cattle camps. You boys have a right to know that."

They considered matters gravely, then Harley spoke for the two of them, briefly. "It'll be an interestin' experiment. We'll dangle along."

"Thought you weren't interested in too many profits," chided Len Revis, when he got all the picture. "Now you're goin' all out, aimin' to get rid of one herd and bring in another."

Britt shrugged. "Maybe its more for the fun of trying a new idea than anything else, Len, to upset the accepted order of things."

"You always did do a heap of talkin' about tryin' quality instead of quantity," agreed Len. "Hope we don't stub our toes. I try to be a fair-minded man but I ain't got the confidence in the squatters you

have. My experience in life has showed them to be sort of uncertain critters."

They bunched the herd for driving and brought it down out of the mountains and sent it in a long, dusty column across Reservation Valley. Leaving Len Revis and the Dodd Brothers to handle it momentarily, Britt sped over to Beaver Flats. He found the men of the squatter camp in council. Cass Partee had just finished haranguing them and he greeted Britt with open relief.

"You couldn't have shown up at a better time, Britt. Not having seen hide nor hair of you for the past three weeks, some of these men felt that your plan had just been words, nothing more. Tell them different."

Britt looked around. Oake Calloway was there, a line of bandage still around his head, but with all of his old gruff, rugged vigor.

"Sure glad to see you up and around, Oake," Britt told him. "You still sold on my plan?"

"More now than I was at first," nodded Calloway. "I've had time to do a heap of thinking on it, and it gets better all the time. Cass and me got some of the crowd convinced, but there's others arguin' against it." Calloway looked at old Sod Tremper.

Britt threw Tremper a friendly smile. "You're a tough old catamount, for a fact. I don't believe it's the plan you're against, it's just because there are cows and cattlemen mixed in with it. Right?"

"Call it right," growled Tremper.

"I understand why you feel as you do, Sod," Britt told him quietly. "And up to a certain point don't blame you a bit. In your shoes I'd probably feel the same. Yet here's an angle. I once knew of a squatter who was a horse thief. But that don't mean I figure all squatters as such. There are some cattlemen who are different, too."

Britt let his glance run around the circle. "Suppose you see the picture straight," he told them bluntly. "If you try and make this the average squatter camp and keep it so, you won't have a chance. You'll have every cattleman in the Royales against you, except me. But if you get busy and prove to the cattlemen you're going to develop something of real permanent value to them, they'll be with you, instead of against you—most of them will, the ones that count. As to my good faith in the matter, where do you think I'm taking my herd of cattle yonder, and why? I told Partee and Calloway that would be my first move in the deal, and I'm making good on the promise."

"And you're bringin' in white faces in place of that mixed stuff?" growled Sod Tremper.

"Right! I'm bringing in white faces—blooded stuff."

FOR a moment the peppery old man stared at Britt.

"It goes agin the grain for me to admit belief in any cow man," said Tremper grudgingly, "but you come nigher to convincin' me than I ever figgered possible. The diggin' that's necessary—it'll take a heap of the right kind of tools."

"I'm ordering the tools at Button Willow when I deliver the herd to the railroad there," said Britt. "But all it takes to yank out sage brush and burn it is a team of horses, a chain and a pocket full of matches. You got all those things."

Gaunt old Sod Tremper came over close to Britt's horse and stood staring up at Britt intently. Far back in the fierce old fellow's eyes Britt glimpsed a loneliness and a sadness.

Britt said gravely, "I understand, Sod. You can trust me."

"I reckon," said the old squatter gruffly. "My boy was about your age. He was a great one for plans of new things. Speakin' for myself, I start grubbin' sage brush this day."

"I reckon that settles the argument," said Cass Partee quickly. "Let's get at the job. We've wasted enough time."

The group broke up, men moving away with the gleam of purpose in their eyes, leaving Britt and Cass alone. "Any more trouble from the outside since I last saw you, Cass?" asked Britt.

Cass shook his head.

"None. But we've kept a guard out, like you suggested."

"Keep one all the time," cautioned Britt. "I'll try and get back before anything breaks."

Rose Calloway came up, vigorous with grace. She tucked a hand into the crook of Cass Partee's arm. Britt had seen how it was between these two, right from the

first. Britt touched his hat and smiled at the girl.

"Big things in the air, ma'am," Britt said.

"I'm glad," she answered simply. "Every woman craves security, a solid piece of earth where she can stay and build things around her. Your plan holds forth that hope for us. We'll do all we can to make it come true."

The Tin Cup outfit drove down the long, slow, dusty miles between Fort Cord and Button Willow. Britt Larkin sent word ahead by stage and, when the tired, bawling herd reached the loading pens at Button Willow, a long line of slatted cattle cars was drawn up on the railroad siding.

Britt and his men were lean and sun-blackened and weary, but they started the loading chore immediately, while a noisy, fussy little yard engine spotted cars at the loading chutes, moved them away as soon as loaded, then spotted another empty.

Even darkness did not stop the job. Britt and his men worked with prod poles in one hand and lanterns in the other. All night long they kept at it, saw the sun come up again through eyes sunken and red rimmed from fatigue. They grabbed a bite of food by relays and returned to the grinding labor. The air was thick with ground up dust, with the smell of cattle and coal smoke and steam from the engine. The last protesting steer went into the last car just before noon of the second day, and less than an hour later an east bound freight picked up the long line of cattle cars and took them, groaning and protesting, away into the hazy distance.

"Me," croaked Len Revis, "I want a drink, a meal, a bath and a bed. And if any hair pin wakes me up before I'm ready, I'll haze the son-of-a-gun with a forty-five."

Len and the Dodd brothers went off together. Britt Larkin sent several messengers over the railroad telegraph wire, then stopped in at a big hardware house in town. He had a long list of tools and supplies made out. "Deliver that stuff through Henry Castro, at Fort Cord," he said wearily.

These things taken care of, Britt went in search of the same things Len Revis had declared himself for.

At sun-up the next morning, the Tin Cup outfit was on its way back to Reservation Valley. They camped one night beside the trail and came through the low southern pass of the valley the next day.

Over east, above Beaver Flats a heavy smudge of smoke lay against the hot sky and Britt knew that the squatters, good to their word, were grubbing and burning sage brush. Turning in to Fort Cord's single street, Britt saw Alec Creager and Henry Castro standing on the store porch, looking toward the smoke, and arguing. Britt pulled in at the store while Len Revis and the Dodds went on to the Guidon to wash away the dust that lay in their throats.

ALEC Creager looked at Britt with grim, fierce eyes. "What the devil are your squatter friends up to, Larkin?" he growled.

"Clearing land—good land," Britt answered quietly. "At my suggestion, just so you'll have the record straight."

"I'm wondering about your sanity," went on Creager. "They tell me you've plumb cleaned out your herd; sold it, lock, stock and barrel. You quittin' the country?"

Britt smiled faintly. "No such luck, Alec. Something for you and Jesse Schell to remember, just in case you get any ideas about my high park range."

Creager reddened slightly. "That's mighty poor talk, Larkin. I don't like it."

"That's tough," drawled Britt. "I notice you've never hesitated to throw poor talk my way. What leads you to believe you're immune against some of the same?"

"Britt's got a point there, Alec," put in Henry Castro drily.

Britt's smile became a mirthless grin. "Alec been putting me over the jumps, eh, Henry?"

Creager stamped a boot heel. "I'm tryin' to find out some straight answers. Those squatters. I don't want to see violence start. I don't want to see men cut down by gunfire, not even squatters. That sort of thing never settled anything in the long run. But if that squatter camp is allowed to dig in and get set— Hang it, Larkin! Just why are you so strong for them? If you'd stayed out of this thing, they'd be long gone by now. I can't keep Jesse Schell peaceful much longer."

"You better," rapped Britt harshly. "The day Schell jumps over the traces

and starts getting rough, that day he signs his own death warrant. A rough lad, Jesse. He'll get it rough, rougher than he ever dreamed."

The frosty browed old cattleman stared at Britt, then glanced away. "There's talk going round that you aim to bring in white faces."

"The best that money can buy," Britt told him. "There won't be many at first, because that sort of stuff costs big money. But they'll increase. I'm tired of chousing mixed mongrel stuff. I'm tired of getting third grade prices for third grade beef. I'm through fooling myself, thinking that because cows look fat when they come off that high park grass, that it is the kind of fat that counts. And I'm through seeing even that kind of fat drain off a herd driving it from here to Button Willow. I'm through sitting back and letting that sort of idiocy go on forever and ever. So I'm going at things different."

"I've done all right on that kind of idocy," Alec Creager said bluntly.

"Because you got an early start during years when your stuff was as good as anyone else's. You made your money, then. But for several years now you've been raising, grazing and handling three head of mongrel stuff to get the price that one good white-face would bring. You haven't been making money during these years—you haven't been doing any better than breaking even, same as the rest of us. You've been keeping up a front, that's all, and blaming everything else but your own thick-headedness, because you can feel things slipping. Give you another ten years of the same sort of business and you'll be a busted flush. That's the truth and you know it."

"I know enough not to tie in with a bunch of squatters," snapped Creager. "They'll leave you high and dry and then laugh at you, Larkin. Then we'll see who's busted."

He stamped away, spare and angular, a chunk of granite from the old West, inured with its creeds and customs and line of thinking—fighting change; unwilling to recognize and grasp the future.

"Well," murmured Henry Castro, "I'd say you have a plumb small chance of swingin' any of Alec Creager's money behind your scheme, Britt."

"I'll use my own and, when it's gone, rustle a loan somewhere," growled Britt. "I ordered those Fresno scrapers and other gear and supplies in Button Willow from Johnson & Page, Henry. Told them to deliver through you. I'll have the money for my herd by then and I'll pay you cash."

THE storekeeper frowned, thinking over what Britt had said.

"Huh!" grunted Castro, looking out at the drifting smoke haze. "Did I say anything about wantin' cash? If you can throw every cussed cent you got to your name into this project, boy, I reckon I can drop a few nickels in the pot. Save your money. You'll need it to buy that herd of white-faces. I'll carry your credit for as long as you need it."

Britt and his men stopped by at Beaver Flats on their way home. The air was thick with pungent smoke. In that smoke men were toiling with horses, drag chains, axes and grubbing tools. In half a dozen different places great piles of sage brush were burning and there were a dozen other ragged circles of ash where fires had already burned out. Already an amazing area had been cleared.

Cass Partee, his face sooted, his shirt black with sweat, grinned up at Britt. "How's it look?"

"If you'd had just half the amount cleared, I'd have called it a whale of a job, fellah."

Cass pulled the sweat from his forehead with snapping fingers. "Something has sure come over the men. They're going at this job as though their lives depended on it. And the hardest worker of them all, is old Sod Tremper."

"The tools and supplies are all ordered," Britt told him. "They'll be here in a week or ten days. We'll get to work on that dam as soon as they do. Any signs of outside trouble, Cass?"

Cass hesitated. "Not exactly. But we're short of fresh meat and yesterday morning old Jed Sharpe headed back into the mountains to try for a deer or two. He hasn't come back. We're beginning to worry about him."

"At this time of year the deer run pretty high up," Britt said. "He probably got so far back he decided to lay out for the night. My men and I will keep our eyes open for him. I'll see that you have

some fresh beef. I left a few head back on my range just for that reason. There'll be some brought down first thing tomorrow."

The afternoon was running out when Britt and Len Revis and Chuck and Harley Dodd jogged their weary broncs out of the timber and across the big park which held the Tin Cup headquarters.

"Seems pretty empty without a flock of cows grazin' around," observed Len Revis. "But give us time and there'll be little white-faced bummers scamperin' all over this park, eh Britt?"

Before Britt could answer, Harley Dodd straightened high in his saddle and his usual brief, quiet drawl carried a grim ring as he exclaimed:

"Britt! Do you see what I see, hangin' from the ridge pole of the cabin?"

Britt looked, swore softly and dug in the spurs. The other men clattered after him. They set their horses up and sat their saddles in a silent, stern faced half circle before the cabin. Harley Dodd had seen correctly. There was something hanging from the projecting end of the ridge pole.

A rope, with a dead man on the end of it!

CHAPTER IX

Grim Fruit

CUTTING the dead man down, they laid him out there in front of the cabin. He was an old man, with thin, gray hair. The front and back of his faded shirt was dark and stiff with dried blood. He'd been shot through and through. His ragged cotton pants were held up with make-shift leather galluses; his old, square toed, flat heeled boots those of a man of the soil, not of the saddle. A squatter, this poor unfortunate.

"This," said Britt harshly, "would be old Jed Sharpe, gone out to try for a couple of deer for the folks on Beaver Flats. He was over-due. They were worrying about him."

Len Revis said, "The pore old devil was dead before they ever hung him up. That shot killed him."

Harley Dodd straightened up and said, "Chuck, you go east, I'll head west. Look for sign."

They went off, leading their horses, eyes searching the ground. Len Revis walked an angry circle, his face pulled tight and bleak.

"Only a human animal would do a thing like that to a man," he said. "Killin' a pore old feller is bad enough. Then to hang him on a rope, is onery!" Len swung a fist in a short, angry gesture.

Britt said nothing. He knew how Len felt. This was a grisly, macabre thing they had discovered. The anger in Britt boiled and boiled, then settled down to a couched, icy stillness. Here was the dark and shadowy start. Here in these deep hills was the beginning of a trail that would be blazed with wicked crimson.

This was more than a killing and a desecration, this was a grisly, flaunting challenge; ironic, cynical, savage.

Britt said, "Catch up a fresh bronc, Len, and take the word down to Beaver Flats. Tell Cass Partee and Oake Calloway, and Sod Tremper. Tell them to bring a wagon up. I want them to see this just as we found it."

Len Revis led his horse over to the corrals. Soon he went racing away. Britt went into the cabin, came out with a blanket and spread it carefully.

He looked around. The park lay empty and still, half gilded by the slanting rays of the sun, with powder blue shadows and mists hovering at the edge of the timber, ready to flow out and possess, just as soon as the sun retreated.

Harley and Chuck Dodd had both vanished in the timber but presently Harley came riding back from the west end of the park.

"Three broncs went that way," he reported, "but cut for the summit after they got into the timber. I'll take it again in the morning when I got a full day of light ahead of me."

They unsaddled and turned their mounts into the big corral, which was a pasture as well. While Harley got a fire going Britt opened the cabin grub box and they set about putting together a frugal supper.

The sun went fully down and the shadows took over and a little twilight wind

began to stir across the park. They got a light going and it was quite dark when Chuck Dodd came riding back out of the night.

He said, "Three of 'em. I found where they killed him. He was packin' out a deer, had backed up to a log to put it down and rest awhile. The time must have been yesterday, some time, because the coyotes had worked over the deer pretty well last night. What did you find, Harley?"

Harley told him and ended, "We'll hit it again in the morning."

It was a silent meal, each of them wrapped in his own grim thoughts. These Dodd brothers were silent, incrutable men, who hid their thoughts and feelings very well. But Britt Larkin knew them thoroughly. They were hard-working, sober, decent riders and he knew now that deep down inside, they were as coldly angry and outraged as himself.

Britt said, "You know what this is the start of, boys."

Harley Dodd nodded. "The start. We'll have a mite of something to say about the finish. When a man forfeits all rights—why then he forfeits all rights. Them three did so."

IT WAS a full two hours later when they heard the mutter of hoofs and the grind of wheels coming across the park. Britt lighted a lantern and went out. The wagon creaked to a stop before the cabin and Cass Partee, Sod Tremper and Oake Calloway climbed out and came into the circle of lantern glow. Sod Tremper had a rifle over his arm.

Britt turned, pulled the blanket aside and held the lantern out. Sod Tremper cursed harshly.

Oake Calloway said, "Jed Sharpe. Your man Revis told us some, Larkin. Maybe you know more about it by this time."

"Three riders did it," Britt said. "He was carrying out a deer. He had stopped to rest when they killed him. After that they brought him here and hung him to the ridge pole, where we found him when we got in this afternoon. We've picked up the trail the killers went out on. In the morning we take it."

"I'd admire to go along," rasped Sod Tremper harshly. "Jed was a lone man, like me, and a friend of mine."

"You have a claim," admitted Britt. "But I have a bigger one. They used him as a challenge to me. I'm answering it. They were warned if they started it rough, they'd get it rougher still. They will."

They loaded Jed Sharpe into the back of the spring wagon. Britt said, a trifle awkwardly, "I hope this won't turn you people against the big purpose. I feel plenty bad about this. In a way maybe I'm responsible and—"

"How could you be, boy?" cut in Sod Tremper. "You ain't a mite responsible, and we ain't lettin' you and your plan down. We gave our word and we'll stick to it. But if those snakes will just crawl out of the brush where I can draw a bead on them, I'll make some new corpses!"

"We'll smoke them out before we're done, Sod," Britt promised. "In the morning there'll be a couple of pack horse loads of fresh beef brought down to the flats, to take the place of the deer Jed Sharpe wasn't able to deliver."

They stopped long enough for a cup of coffee and then the wagon rolled away. Britt went out immediately to the pasture corral after a fresh horse.

"Where you headin'?" asked Len Revis anxiously.

"Shield and Cross, first," Britt told him. "Come along if you want."

They headed due west. It was black dark in the timber but these were timber wise horses they were up on, so they made good time despite the gloom.

The Shield and Cross headquarters stood in a spacious basin, cupped in the mighty flank of the Royales. It was fairly late but lights were still glowing in the bunkhouse and main ranchhouse when Britt and Len Revis rode up.

Len said, "I'll wait at the bunkhouse."

Alec Creager had built a fine, spacious home for himself and his daughter, with a broad veranda running across the front of it. At one end of it a hammock swung and Britt was unaware of its occupant as he clanked up the steps and across the porch. There was a stir and Marty Creager's voice asked, "Who is it?"

Britt turned. "Britt Larkin. Your Dad inside?"

Something in Britt's tone brought the girl out of the hammock and along the porch. She had on some kind of a light colored dress and she made a slim shadow against the dark.

"Dad's inside with Tom Aden. Is something wrong?"

"Yes—something. I want to ask your father about it."

She led the way in, through a dimly lighted hallway and into a small corner room which Alec Creager used as an office. Creager, seated behind a paper littered table, came to his feet at sight of Britt. Tom Aden, deep slouched in another chair, long legs crossed and stretched in front of him, noted the sternness in Britt's face, stirred slightly and went still again, though with a sharpened light in his eyes.

"Hardly expected this, Larkin," said Creager bluntly. "Anybody but you. What's on your mind?"

Britt matched Alec Creager's bluntness. "A dead man. We found him hanging to the end of the ridgepole of our cabin when I and my men reached headquarters this afternoon. He'd been shot first, then hung up. A squatter, by the name of Jed Sharpe."

BRITT heard Marty Creager's low gasp behind him.

"You mean," growled Alec Creager, "That this man had been shot dead, and then hung up by the neck?"

"I mean just that."

"That's a rotten thing to do!" exploded the frosty browed cattleman. "You might shoot a man with reason, but then to make gallows bait out of him as well—*arrgh!*" He slammed an angry fist on the table.

Tom Aden stirred again. "Any idea who did it, Britt?" he asked quietly.

Britt told the rest of the story so far as he knew it. "There were definitely three in on it," he ended. "Chuck and Harley Dodd both agreed on that and those two boys can read their sign. I'm running the trail out in the morning."

Alec Creager was leaning forward, one braced hand against the table edge. "Aside from the news angle, Larkin, why have you brought this word to me?"

"Just to let you know the lid is off and so you'll understand why things are going to happen. So you'd know who struck the first blow. I might add that some weeks ago a skulker in the sage tried a long-range shot at me. I was talking to Cass Partee and Oake Calloway at the time, down by Beaver Flats. They missed me and creased Calloway, missed killing him by half the width of a rifle bullet. I let that pass at the time. But I'm not letting this pass."

"And where do you think the trail will lead you? Not to this ranch, I can tell you."

"I never at any time had the slightest thought that it would," Britt said quietly. "You and I don't see eye to eye on some things, but you're no ghoul, nor have you any ghouls in your outfit. You might kill a man, but you wouldn't shoot him in the back, and you wouldn't hang him on a rope, after."

"Neither would Jesse Schell," growled Creager.

Britt gave a small shrug. "I wouldn't put it past Obe Widdens," he fenced.

"Until you know for sure, Larkin, I wouldn't name any man."

"I'll find the man, or rather the men," promised Britt. "I'll name them. And I'll find out if they acted under orders, and who gave the order. They're all equally guilty of a rotten, pointless, cowardly murder. And they threw that murder in my face. We'll see."

Britt turned to leave. Tom Aden said, "Wait a minute, Britt. Jing Ivory and me were up near the summit yesterday, lookin' for strays. We were late getting out there. We were giving our broncs a blow and having a smoke for ourselves before starting home. We saw, crossing a ridge below us, three riders. They were—"

"Hold it, Tom," broke in Alec Creager. "This is no mix of ours. I don't know anything for sure, and you don't. No, not our mix."

Tom Aden swung his head, fixed an intent glance on Creager. "You mean that, Alec?" he murmured.

The tone was gentle, but there was something in it and in Aden's eyes that made Creager squirm in his chair.

"Squatters never brought anything to a country but trouble," growled Creager. He got to his feet, paced up and down the room, with Tom Aden's glance following him. Abruptly the cattleman turned. "By thunder, no!" he exploded. "Of course I didn't mean that, Tom. Murder is murder. Go ahead—have your say."

The Shield and Cross foreman looked at Britt and said, "The three riders Jing

Ivory and I saw were Obe Widdens, Duke Nulk and Clint Crowder. If that is worth anything to you, Britt, take it and welcome."

Britt nodded. "Thanks, Tom. Been two or three things lately I've had reason to thank you for."

Tom Aden stood up, reached for his hat. "A man calls things as he sees them," he said gravely. "If he doesn't, he's a lost soul." He was leaving as he spoke, but paused a moment beside the silent, pale Marty Creager. He smiled down at her and his eyes were suddenly full of a warm affection. "Don't let this thing give you nightmares, young 'un." Then he was out a side door and gone, his spurs tinkling.

Britt said, "I'll be getting along, too. I just wanted to be sure you got this news straight, Alec."

Creager nodded gruffly. "You dead set on making this your fight?"

"I reckon. Tom Aden just said everything. A man calls things as he sees them, or he's a lost soul. *Adios!*"

CHAPTER X

Clint Crowder

MARTY Creager followed Britt out on to the porch. "Did Jed Sharpe have a wife, or children, maybe?" she asked.

"No, just friends, and a right to live."

Marty stiffened at Britt's tone. "Of course. Did I suggest otherwise? I'm not—callous."

"Sorry," amended Britt. "I know you're not. But you must see a thing like that to realize how wickedly savage it was. It's put a raw edge in me. Good night!"

For a long time after Britt and Len Revis had ridden away into the night, Marty Creager stood there. When she finally went in, her father was still in his office, deep sunk in brooding thought. Marty put an arm about his shoulder and he reached up to take hold of her hand. There was a deep affection between father and daughter.

Marty spoke with slow gravity, saying something which startled Alec Creager. "There is no being neutral in this squatter fight, is there, Dad?"

"Eh? Neutral? What are you driving at, child?"

"You just can't turn your back on a thing and make it cease to exist," was Marty's sober statement. "You can't say something didn't happen, and know that it didn't. That would be telling a lie to yourself."

Alec Creager pulled her down on his knee. "You just forget about it. This is the business of men. Leave it to them. I don't want you getting yourself all fussed up over something that don't concern you."

Marty shook her red gold head. "It isn't as easy as that, Dad. There's been too much of that in my life already—not concerning myself about others, I mean. For too long I've lived in a world padded with lovely, soft pink cotton. I'm not that fragile. It's high time I slept on some bare boards for a change."

Creager was startled, bewildered. "What the blue blazes kind of talk is that? Time you slept on bare boards! Good Lord, child, are you well?"

"Perfectly. Guess I make things sound kind of mixed up. Well, I am mixed up, and I've got to think about it. Good night!"

She leaned over, brushed a kiss against his cheek and left him.

Alec Creager stared at the door which closed behind her. His frosty brows were pinched in a troubled scowl. "Pink cotton and bare boards," he grumbled. "What's got into the girl?"

* * * * *

They lost the trail far up along the summit of the Royales, where the cap rock broke through, grey and flinty and barren except for an occasional pot hole where ragged snow brush and a few stunted, storm beaten aspens clung.

This was well west of the Shield and Cross range, was in fact due north of the western portion of Running S range, where the last of the bigger high parks lay. Further west along the flank of the Royales the timber took over more thickly and unbroken. In that country were only a few scattered smaller layouts, one-

man outfits, such as those of Bob Watrous, Abe Dickshot and Pete Skene.

These men seldom left the deep hills, literally living off their little herds of scrubby stock, rather than because of them. Only at long intervals were they seen in the valley.

Britt Larkin pulled in his horse, pulled his neck deeper into the collar of his old, use scuffed leather jacket. This high up there was a frigid bite to the air, even though the sun was already hours high.

"No use," he said. "We could ram around here for a week and still be no wiser than we are now."

Harley Dodd nodded agreement. "We might drop by Running S on our way back," he suggested.

"I'd thought of that," said Britt. "We'll do it."

They got off the cap rock and into the timber, dropping fast across the long curving slopes. They hit the park country where cattle grazed and cut down the miles swiftly at a swinging jog. They cut on to an angling ridge, the point of which jutted out above the valley, and on this point, crouched among the massive but gracefully tapering boles of a grove of yellow pines lay Running S headquarters.

THEY came up past the sprawling area of corrals and saw Jesse Schell, leaning back against the saddle-pole by the cavvy corral gate, talking with two riders whose horses stood hip-shot and relaxed. These two were Alec and Marty Creager.

Harley Dodd exclaimed softly. Britt Larkin said nothing, but his shoulders stiffened and a certain weary chill came into his eyes.

Jesse Schell pushed away from the saddle-pole, spread his feet, swung his big shoulders belligerently as he squared around to face Britt and Harley Dodd. Britt's glance touched Alec Creager briefly and the bleak question in it brought a faint flush to Creager's leathery face. That same question was in Britt's glance as it moved on to the girl. She met it with a quiet steadiness and Britt touched his hat almost mechanically. Then Britt was looking at Jesse Schell.

"I see you've heard the news, Jesse, if you didn't know all about it, already. Is Widdens around? Or Clint Crowder or Duke Nulk?"

"Maybe, maybe not," growled Jesse. "What's it to you?"

"A few questions I want to ask them."

"Maybe they're not interested."

"They will be. Take a look in the bunkhouse, Harley. If they're in there, rout 'em out."

Harley started to swing down. "No need of that," snapped Jesse. "I'll bring 'em out." He raised his voice in a yell. "Obe—Duke—Clint, come out here!"

Obe Widdens was first, lank, slouchy, a glinting wariness in his flat, hard, animal eyes. Duke Nulk, short, thick, frowsily untidy. Then Clint Crowder, neat, small, cat-like. All had guns strapped on.

"Come over here," ordered Schell. Then his tone went sarcastic. "Mister Larkin says he wants to ask you some questions. We mustn't disappoint him."

"Questions about what?" said Clint Crowder. His voice was as small, as neat and as purring as its owner.

"About day before yesterday," said Britt crisply. "What were you three doing over around my headquarters?"

"We weren't," answered Crowder. "We don't crave the company of a squatter-lover, so why should we go anywhere near his hangout?"

Duke Nulk laughed coarsely. "Now ain't that pure gospel!"

Obe Widdens said nothing, but there was a taunting mockery in the hard shine of his eyes.

"Satisfied, Larkin?" jeered Jesse Schell.

"No. But I see how it is. You'd all swear to a lie. I should have known that."

"Lie?" purred Crowder. "I don't like the word—don't like it at all. It's a word you can eat—right now, Larkin!"

Clint Crowder was moving ahead as he spoke, now stopped but a stride distant, staring up at Britt with pale, moiling eyes. Obe Widdens said, "Hah!" and swung a little wider. But he stopped in his tracks when Harley Dodd snapped, "Stay right there, Widdens!" Harley had a gun in his hand and Widdens never even saw him draw it.

Clint Crowder's pale eyes flickered and shifted, a mistake he had no chance to rectify. For Britt Larkin spun his horse in, leaned down and made a grab.

Crowder, a dandy, was wearing a beaded buckskin vest. Britt got a handful of

the back of it, jerked it up, hauling Crowder against his stirrup with bitter violence. Another lift had Crowder completely off his feet, where he hung, spitting curses like an enraged cat, but unable to get at his gun because the twisting lift of that fancy vest had his arms trapped and lifted.

Britt gave the venomous little rider no time to squirm free. He locked his free hand in Crowder's hair, gave another upward heave and hauled Crowder across the saddle in front of him, where he held him with one hand while with the other he jerked Crowder's gun from the holster. Then he gave the raging little rider another lift and shove and sent him on over, to land heavily on his face and chest on the ground below.

IT HADN'T taken long, just a few short seconds of swift and ruthless action, with Britt's startled horse whirling and half rearing. It was over and done with before Jesse Schell could do anything but stare. And under Harley Dodd's gun, Obe Widdens and Duke Nulk did not dare try anything.

Britt quieted his horse. He was tall in the saddle again at this moment, a rash and bitter recklessness running all through him.

"My patience is running awful thin, Jesse." His voice was cold, brittle. "I'll get the real answer to this before I'm done. When I do, I'll write the answer. In the meantime I'm laying out a dead line. It runs from Shield and Cross headquarters south across the valley through town. Running S stays west of that line. That meanst you and every creeping coyote you're paying wages to. That's the line, from Shield and Cross south through town. Don't forget it!"

Clint Crowder had pulled himself up to a sitting position. He had hit the ground —hard. His mouth was bleeding, his eyes dull and stupid.

Britt gave him a glance, then looked at Alec and Marty Creager, his eyes sardonic, frosty.

Marty, a trifle pale, met the look steadily. Alec Creager flushed and growled, "Don't jump at conclusions, Larkin."

"I know only what I see," said Britt. "After last night, I can't help but be surprised. All right, Harley!"

They swung away, half circling, so that at no time were their backs fully to Jesse Schell and his men. Schell, his face congested, stared after them and the inner workings of the man's mind and character lay fully exposed on his face. At the moment he was inexpressibly malevolent and ugly. He swung his head heavily, half lifted a hand as though to order Obe Widdens and Duke Nulk after Britt Larkin and Harley Dodd, but stopped the move as Alec Creager warned him.

"Let be, Jesse," Creager said harshly. "They rode in, they looked you in the eye, they told you off. That was the time to do something, while they were looking at you. This is twice I've seen Britt Larkin loom a much bigger man than you. I'm convinced. Come on, Marty!"

They whirled their horses and rode away.

Britt Larkin and Harley Dodd had already disappeared in the timber.

Jesse Schell began to curse, low at first, then with rising fury. Obe Widdens came over to him and said, "Duke and me can make a fast ride around and come in on the trail ahead of Larkin and Dodd. We can lay out and wait for them, if yuh want."

Jesse Schell swung a powerful arm, knocking Widdens to one side. "You'll do nothing until I tell you to," Schell snarled. "Get out of my way!"

Schell headed for the ranchhouse, almost staggering with rage. Obe Widdens stared after him, strange lights in his hard, flat eyes. Then he shrugged, went back to the bunkhouse, with Duke Nulk following. Neither of them paid any attenion to Clint Crowder, who got shakily to his feet, scrubbing a shirt sleeve across his bleeding mouth.

Crowder looked long in the direction Britt Larkin and Harley Dodd had gone. Then he looked at the ranchhouse, where Jesse Schell had disappeared. Finally he looked at the bunkhouse.

"I step out, ready for a play," he mumled. "And they let me dangle. Schell, Widdens, Nulk—they dogged it. I'll never go out on a limb for this blasted outfit again. But I'll take care of Larkin in my own way!"

He headed for the bunkhouse, a small man, his cat-like poise regained; pale-eyed, venomous, deadly.

CHAPTER XI

The Works of Man

PUNGENT SMOKE of burning sage brush was a constant fog against the sky. Up in the Saber River gorge, above the White Thunder Falls the clank of sledge hammer on steel rock drills beat a constant echo. From time to time the hard, shocking roll of exploding blasting powder drifted down Reservation Valley. Hot summer days passed one into another while men sweated and toiled from daylight to dark.

Up in the first edge of timber on the Royales, Len Revis and Chuck and Harley Dodd swung axes and pushed and pulled on a cross-cut. They stacked logs of various length and thickness. They helped Cass Partee load these on to a heavy work wagon and Cass hauled the logs over to the gorge.

At the gorge, along with Oake Calloway and two other squatters, Hyland and Grimes, Britt Larkin swung a sledge, turned a rock drill and fought rock and stubborn earth. Oake Calloway, who understood such things, made up the powder charges, set off the blasts.

Directly above Beaver Flats, along the east slope of the valley, men and horses and a pair of Fresno scrapers furrowed the earth into an irrigation ditch which in time curved gradually down toward the river. On the flats, squatter women cooked food, carried it to their men. They washed clothes and cut wild hay along the river flats and stacked it for the hard worked horses to feed on.

Each day saw the spread of cleared land grow wider and longer as more acres of sagebrush were ripped up and burned. There were no shirkers. Everybody worked, even the children having odd chores to do.

All these things Henry Castro took note of when he drove out from town in a buckboard. He located Britt Larkin out at the gorge and talked with him.

"These are like no other squatters I ever saw before, Britt," he said. "I can hardly believe it. I never saw men work so hard. Women, too—even the kids."

"That is because at last they have found a real purpose, the promise of a real future," Britt said. "Think of the average squatter, Henry. He is constantly under the shadow of uncertainty. Even when he found a stretch of land he didn't have the heart to put too much effort into developing it, because he never knew when he'd be forced to move on. He never had the promise of real permanence so he did not dare dig in his roots too deep, because of the heart ache and misery that would come with tearing them up. But these people do see permanence ahead and they're willing to work until they drop to gain it. Things are moving, Henry. We could put water on that land this fall if we wanted to."

"It's high time this valley had something in it besides sage brush and emptiness," nodded Castro. "I'm satisfied, Britt. I'm getting a real run for my money. Any more outside trouble lately?"

Britt knew what Castro meant. He shook his head. "I laid out a dead-line," he said grimly. "So far Schell has observed it. I'm not deluding myself, though. Sooner or later Jesse will come across it, full of trouble. He's too bull-headed to learn anything other than by hard experience. We won't be caught unawares. I got old Sod Tremper on the prowl all the time, watching all the trails, checking all the signs. In the meantime we'll get all the work done we can."

"You can tell these people," said Henry Castro, "that if they need a little credit for groceries, clothes and things of that sort, I'm prepared to carry them for a while. From what I've seen today, they're a good risk."

Not only had Britt seen nothing of the Running S since he had laid down the deadline, but he had seen nothing of Shield and Cross, either. He thought about that often, while he swung a sledge or turned a drill. And inner grimness as well as the hard physical toil was leaning him to rawhide and steel. He thought much of Marty Creager. And then, one day, there she was, riding down into the gorge.

It was at midday. Work had paused for a moment, while men fortified themselves

with food for the long, driving afternoon hours ahead. The food had been brought up to them by Rose Calloway and two older squatter women. Rose was sitting cross-legged beside Britt, talking to him while he ate.

Rose was telling him about the plans she and Cass Partee had made, of the home they would build, where it would be located. She and Cass had already told Britt of their marriage plans. The day that Saber River water first met that rich and waiting soil where the sage brush was being cleared, that would be their wedding day. It was to be a symbol of their future.

BRITT had come to deeply admire these two young people; they were clean strain, these two. They were of the breed of the Argonauts of the west, the true empire builders. Courage, faith, steadfastness and of simple dignity—there were their attributes.

Britt had made some humorous remark at which Rose was gaily laughing. But the laugh broke off as Rose looked past Britt.

She murmured, "You have a visitor, Britt."

Britt twisted around, saw Marty Creager sitting her horse and he got up swiftly and went over to her.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Marty," he told her. "Get down and have a bite with us."

She dismounted slowly, looking sober and a little tired. Change had come over this girl. There was still that straight, clean pride in her but there seemed to be a shadow behind her eyes. Britt introduced her to Rose Calloway, who greeted Marty with her straight-forward, generous sweetness.

"I'll show you around, Marty," said Britt. "Show you what we've done and what we intend to do."

Marty accepted a sandwich from one tin pail and a cup of black coffee from another. Presently Rose Calloway, oddly smiling, went over to talk to her father. Later, when Britt started showing Marty around, Rose and the other women gathered up their food containers and other gear and trudged away. Marty watched them, particularly Rose, with shadowed, enigmatic eyes.

"There is a strange, deep loveliness in her," said Marty quietly. "A richness of nature that is like a fragrance."

"Eh!" exclaimed Britt, startled. "Oh, you mean Rose? Yeah, she's great. You've described her perfectly, Marty. There are a lot of unexpected values in all these people, after you get to know them. They're the workingest people I ever saw, now that they have something real to work for. All of them, men and women, have slaved like giants on this job."

She looked at him, sweated down to brown rawhide himself. "You've hardly been idle yourself, Britt."

Britt laughed, held out his calloused hands. "That's what moving hard rock does to a man. And there's been plenty to move. Come on and I'll show you."

Marty trudged around at his side and Britt showed her where the dam was to be, took her into the cut that was being driven through the solid rock to the upper end of the gulch that would provide a long length of naturally formed irrigation ditch.

"When the dam is full we'll be able to throw a four-foot head of water through this cut if we want to," Britt explained. "Over there we'll build a log sluice gate that we can raise or lower, controlling the flow of water, or cutting it off altogether when we want to. By this time next year there'll be green acres in Reservation Valley to make your heart sing."

Marty observed everything with interest, asking a few questions here and there. But it was plain that this interest was secondary to something else on her mind. The squatter men were back at their toil and Britt was taking Marty over to her horse again when the girl finally voiced her real thoughts.

"I'm amazed, Britt, really, over all that has been done, and is being done. But you mustn't bury yourself too completely here in this gorge. You should be out, riding the valley and the hills and taking note of things that are happening."

Britt gave her a quick glance. "Such as what?"

"Jesse Schell has brought Dutch Klymer and nearly a dozen of his men in from across the Royales. They are headquartering at the Running S. It doesn't look good at all. I know Dad is worried.

It can mean only one thing."

Britt stood in frowning thought, lips pursed. "Yeah," he admitted, "it means only one thing. I've been wondering which way Jess Schell would jump. Dutch Klymer, eh? Wonder what bait Jesse offered him?"

"You know the trouble Dad had with Klymer, years ago," said Marty. "Klymer swore then that some day he'd be back. Now, he is."

Britt knew the story. There had been a time when this "Dutch" Klymer, at the head of a number of wilder spirits, had ridden the high parks of the Royales, living off of whoever's beef they happened to run across when they were hungry, slow-elking still more of it to sell to the mess shacks of a couple of wildcat mining outfits over on the north side beyond the crest of the Royales.

ALEC CREAGER had organized and led the move to run Klymer and his gang out of the high parks and that was when Klymer had made his vow to come back some day. Now he had and was quartering at the Running S.

"What," asked Britt gravely, "does your father think of his good friend Jesse Schell, now?"

"Father was all through with Jesse Schell when he heard of the murder of that squatter, Jed Sharpe, the one that was hung up in front of your headquarters."

"Then he believes that Schell and his men were responsible?"

Marty shrugged slim, graceful shoulders. "What else could he believe? That day you and Harley Dodd saw Dad and men at the Running S—well, that was why we were there, so Dad could tell Jesse Schell not to count on Shield and Cross in any way toward moves against the squatters in Reservation Valley. Dad told you not to jump at conclusions, but I think you did."

"That's right, I did." Britt nodded. "I'm mighty glad to know I was wrong. Tell your father that for me, will you?"

"Why not tell him yourself? Or have you forgotten the trail over to Shield and Cross?"

"Maybe I've been doubtful of my welcome," countered Britt. "The last time I was there I didn't exactly hear any trumpets blowing."

Marty pulled on her buckskin gauntlets, picked up the reins and went swiftly into the saddle. She looked down at Britt with veiled, enigmatic eyes.

"Times change, and so do people's minds—about many things." Then, as she shook the reins, she added, "Tell Rose Calloway I think she's lovely."

Before Britt could answer that one, she was gone, whipping up and over the rim of the gorge, riding her plunging mount as though she were a part of it.

Britt sought out Oake Calloway, told him about Dutch Klymer. "It's going to get rough, Oake," Britt ended. "How are your folks fixed for guns and ammunition?"

"Some of us have them, but not all," growled Calloway. "We've been a peaceful folk. But if this comes to a smoke-out, Britt, you won't find us wanting in courage or purpose."

"I know that," said Britt. "I'll see that

[*Turn page*]

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there are enough guns to go around. You'll have to carry on without me for a while, Oake. There's one good piece of news. We won't have any trouble with Shield and Cross. I knew that, given time, Alec Creager would come around."

Britt got his horse and rode up into the timber, where he told Len Revis and the Dodd Brothers to lay aside their axes and saws. He told them about Dutch Klymer.

"You boys will be riding patrol steadily, now. But never alone. Always two and two. Harley and Chuck together. Len, you locate Sod Tremper and the two of you stick together. Schell and Klymer most certainly are figuring on some kind of mischief and we don't want to let them catch us off guard. So watch every trail."

Len Revis laid aside the ax he'd been wielding. "Never been so sick of a tool before in my life. I been yearnin' to hit the saddle again. Even bad news can have its good side."

Britt's next port of call was town. Fort Cord lay still and drowsy in the afternoon sunshine. But when Britt pulled up in front of Henry Castro's store, Henry was at the door, waving an agitated hand.

"Get in here and out of sight," he exhorted. "There's a poisonous little snake in town."

"Meaning who?" asked Britt, jingling across the porch.

"Meaning Clint Crowder. Been hanging around town for the past couple of days, lapping up liquor at the Guidon and making his tough talk."

"What about?"

"You! What did you ever do to him personal to make him so all out hungry for your scalp, boy?"

"I roughed him up a little over at Running S headquarters one day when he began to bristle," said Britt. "I knew he'd have the tomahawk out for me because of that, but not enough to make it a one-man feud."

"He's had some sort of row with Jesse Schell and drew his time. His talk is that he's going to stick around Reservation Valley just long enough to get even with you, then drift out of the country."

"Well," said Britt quietly, "far be it from me to disappoint him if he wants a little understanding. But first, how you fixed for Winchesters, Henry?"

"Got six or eight in stock. Why?"

"I want 'em, and could use six or eight more. Also, a case of ammunition. Can you have the extras brought in on the stage?"

"Things as bad as that?" asked the store-keeper soberly. "I haven't heard anything outside of Crowder's yowling.

Britt told him about Dutch Klymer.

"That," said Henry Castro "is bad. I'll get the rifles for you, Britt. No wonder Alec Creager is worried. Which just goes to show that running a coyote out of the clover patch once, won't necessarily keep him out for good. There's only one way to take care of a varmint permanently. Where you going now?"

"I won't keep Clint Crowder waiting too long," said Britt grimly.

"Forget him!" exclaimed the store-keeper worriedly. "He'll drink up all his wages, then drift."

"What did you just say about a varmint in a clover patch?"

"But he's a slickery one, boy. He's liable to get you in the back."

"All the more reason I should hunt him up—first," said Britt.

CHAPTER XII

Snake's End

NODDING to Castro, Britt went out and up the street and, while he never heard a sound or saw a move, it seemed he could sense a stirring and a drawing of deep breaths all through the town. It was as though the town had been waiting for him to appear and settle this thing, one way or the other, and now was watching, tense and breathless.

Britt took his time, watching all the angles where Crowder might be hid out, gradually working toward the Guidon. Britt had no liking for this sort of thing. It wasn't fear, but just a distaste for bloody violence.

There was no killer instinct in Britt

Larkin and he would go a long way to avoid the snarl of guns and the lash of smoke if he could do so with honor. But distasteful tasks had to be done sometimes.

Maybe he could catch Crowder unawares, disarm him, put the fear of the Lord in him and send him packing. If things worked out that way, that was the way they would be. If not—well, a man did what he had to do.

He reached the door of the Guidon, stepped swiftly through. Except for the bartender, the only person in the place was Clint Crowder. The venomous little rider sat at a poker table, facing the door. He was slumped forward across the table, head on his arms, sound asleep.

The bartender looked at Britt, shrugged and turned up his hands expressively. As Britt slid along beside the bar the drink handler whispered heavily:

"You'd be justified in blowing him apart, just like he is, after the talk he's made against you."

Britt kept moving quietly, coming up in back of Crowder. He leaned over and inched Crowder's gun carefully from the holster, then went on around, moved up a chair and sat down across the table from Crowder. He built a smoke, lighted it and thrust the smoking end of the match under Crowder's nose.

Crowder stirred, pushed himself up, sneezed violently. Then he blinked, staring at Britt with heavy eyes. But only for a moment. Then his eyes cleared, sharpened and blazed with quick hate and intent. He shoved his chair skittering back, jerked to his feet and sent a hand clawing toward his empty holster.

"Take it easy, Clint," drawled Britt. "I got there first. Now what's all this you got against me?"

Crowder's answer was a snarled curse. Then he whirled, running for the open end of the bar.

"Watch him, barkeep!" Britt rapped. "Don't let him get behind there!"

The bartender tried, but he was a heavy, slow moving man, and the vindictive, cat-like Crowder was too fast and wicked for him, grabbing a bottle off the bar shelf and driving it crashing into the bartender's face. The bartender went down and Crowder plunged past him, crouched so the bar hid him fully. And then Britt Larkin realized that this thing could only end one way.

Britt slid out of his chair, gun drawn, moving toward the door. Crowder, he knew, was after the bar gun. There was nearly always a bar gun of some sort back there.

Twin muzzles of a sawed off shotgun came up over the edge of the bar, with Crowder's head and shoulders behind them. Crowder seemed to figure that Britt would still be at the poker table, and it was toward this spot that he started to lay the shotgun. Instantly he saw his mistake and whipped the gun around. That was when Britt shot, the slug cutting a faint gouge in the bar top before crashing into Crowder's chest.

Crowder's head dropped forward and he slid down behind the bar, setting off the shotgun with dying fingers. The roaring smash of the weapon shook the room and spraying buckshot chopped a cloud of splinters from the ceiling.

The bartender came crawling on hands and knees around the open end of the bar, face smeared with crimson from a savage cut across the forehead.

"Loco!" he mumbled thickly. "He went stark loco!"

WORK WENT on around Beaver Flats, up in the gorge and across the slope where the Fresno scrapers gouged and slashed. There was no slackening in the tempo of things, but now, always close at hand to these grim faced men were rifles, loaded and ready for any emergency, and whenever men lifted sweating faces, resting momentarily from their toil, they searched all distances with intent eyes. At night, in the flats, camp was compact and men guarded it in shifts, the night through.

Came a day when Oake Calloway drew Britt Larkin aside and said, "The women folks tell me we're short of beef again. And I heard Len Revis say, when he brought the last load in, that the surplus you'd saved from your herd was all used up. D'you think we might be able to buy a couple from Shield and Cross, Britt?"

"I'll ride up and find out," Britt said.

On his way in to Shield and Cross, Britt swung around by his own headquarters. Everything was quiet here, but the place had begun to show the look of being long empty. Any human habita-

tion, Britt mused, began to die, unless men kept it infused with life. Well, life would be brought back to it when he brought his herd of white faces in later on. Until then it would have to wait on in its empty loneliness.

To the west, where his and Shield and Cross range adjoined Britt bumped into activity. He met up with Stony Cuff, a Shield and Cross rider, who had just turned back a small bunch of Alec Creager's cattle. Cuff, a genial, happy go lucky sort, grinned and begged a smoke off Britt.

"Never was over fond of fences," said Cuff. "But I could wish there was one along this range line."

Britt handed over a full sack of Durham. "Keep it, Stony. Got more in my saddle-bags. What's all this fence talk?"

"The Old Man's had us busy as pack rats, drifting all our cattle down this side of headquarters," explained Stony. "And, cow nature being what it is, a lot of the pesky critters keep trying to move on over to your grass, which keeps us scramblin' to turn 'em back."

"Don't bother to turn 'em back," said Britt. "Let 'em go. I won't be needing any of my grass for some time and there's no sense letting it go to waste. Shucks, man—let 'em go, and welcome."

"That sounds good to me, Britt," said Stony, "but I can't do it without orders from headquarters. Alec was pretty definite about us holding the cattle right on this line."

"What's Creager's idea in stripping his west range—grass all used up?" Britt asked.

Stony shook his head. "Not a question of grass so much as it is a question of neighbors," was his dry remark. "Running S ain't as popular with us as it used to be. With Dutch Klymer moving in with Jesse Schell, Alec Creager figgers we better keep temptation as far away from Running S as possible. Klymer always did fancy the other feller's cows, you know. Say, what's this talk I been hearing about you and Clint Crowder tangling in town?"

Britt shrugged. "Something I didn't enjoy. But Crowder would have it. In that case, what's a man to do?"

"Jest what you did, I reckon. Crowder prided himself thataway. Doggone it, there's another bunch of cows tryin' to pull a sneak on me."

And Stony spurred away, cutting across the long, green park.

The closer he got to Shield and Cross headquarters, the more cattle Britt saw. Creager had certainly moved everything east of headquarters. When he rode up past the corrals Britt saw Alec Creager and Tom Aden hooking a team into the ranch spring wagon. Aden was his usual enigmatic, still-faced self, but his eyes were friendly. Frosty browed old Alec looked very grim and a little tired and perhaps worried. He gave Britt a gruff nod.

"Any objection to me puttin' a couple of wires across the most open passes along the line of our ranges, Larkin?" he asked. "Temporary, of course, but right now it's running us ragged keeping our cattle on our side of the line. A couple of wires would help a lot."

"No need of wire or riding line either," said Britt. "Let the cows go. I won't be needing grass until fall and you're welcome to it until then, Alec."

CREAGER stared at him. "That's plumb generous," he blurted.

Britt shrugged. "Some day I hope you'll get around to the realization that I'm a friend of yours, not an enemy. I say, let your cows go."

Tom Aden looked at Creager and murmured, "See, Alec? I told you."

Creager flushed. "I'll pay you grazing rights, Britt."

"You won't pay me anything. But here's what you can do. You can sell us an occasional beef to keep the pots full down at Beaver Flats. We've used up the last of mine. That's what I came to see you about."

"Marty was telling me about the job you're doing down in the valley," said Creager slowly. "Maybe you got something there, after all. Never thought I'd live to see the day when I could stand the thought of my beef feedin' squatters, without me busting an artery. But," and here he smiled grimly, "I can see the point of it now. Take what you want, Britt, and this time I'm the one to say—no payment. Tom, you see that all our boys get the word."

"Now," drawled Aden, "we're at last

coming down to common sense and cases."

Britt spun a smoke. "What about that new partnership over west, Alec?"

Creager's face turned harshly bitter. "I'll wait that one out. It may mean nothing, it may mean plenty. I'll wait for the first real move. Then, we'll see. I thought better of Jesse Schell than that, takin' up with a known cow thief."

"Jesse," drawled Britt, "is full of surprises. We're not done with him yet."

Tom Aden had begun unhooking the team from the spring wagon. Marty Creager came over from the ranchhouse, drawing on her gauntlets.

"Hello, Britt," she said. Then, to her father, "I thought we were going to town after a load of barbed wire?"

"No need of it now," Creager told her. "Britt says we can use his grass."

"Some day," said Marty slowly, "I hope we can start giving instead of always taking."

"Your father is now, Marty," Britt said quickly. "He's giving beef to feed the folks down in the valley."

"That is something," acknowledged Marty. "Now, perhaps, I can ride with my head up again. Tom, would you catch up a horse for me? I'm still going to town. There's the mail and a couple of other errands I want to do."

She followed Aden over to the corrals. Alec Creager watched her and said ruefully, "She's been giving me fits, saying that I'd eventually benefit by the job you and the squatters are doing, Britt, and that I should be helping. If it's not too late and if you're needing money, I'd like to kick in with my share."

Britt ground his cigarette butt under his heel, a smile breaking across his face. He put out his hand. "Shake, Alec. This is what I've been waiting and hoping for from the first. Not your money exactly, though I may have to hold you to that, but mainly the fact that you're willing to back the deal. This will give the folks down at Beaver Flats a big lift. We've always needed you with us, for the future as well as the present."

Britt went into his saddle as Marty came riding over from the corrals. "I'll be with you as far as the forks of the trail," he said.

"There'll be fresh beef down at the Flats tomorrow morning, Britt," Alec Creager said.

Marty was silent for some time as she and Britt rode through the nodding timber. Finally she stirred.

"Strange how things work out, isn't it? The last time we were completely alone I was doing my best to hit you with my quirt, and you were angry."

"Maybe I had that quirting coming, Marty," said Britt quickly. "I acted pretty rough that day and I've been sorry about it ever since. Suppose we call it a mistake all around and forget it."

SHE GAVE him a slanting, veiled glance. "You are a strange person, Britt Larkin, a little hard to understand at times. Here a few short weeks ago you gave off the impression that life to you was just something to laugh a careless way through. Now you've changed." She went silent for a moment, before adding, "That affair with Clint Crowder must have been pretty terrible."

"There are some men you can reason with and some that you can't," Britt told her gravely. "There are some to whom the satisfying of a hate means more than life or anything else. Crowder was like that. I certainly didn't enjoy it, but I had no other out. It was one of those things."

"Tall in the saddle, Dad called it. You've changed his ideas on a lot of things, Britt, mainly on yourself."

Britt grinned. "From what he said to me, you've been giving him quite a scuffing over."

She colored faintly. "I said before that people change, and so do their ideas on different things. How is—Rose Calloway?"

"Great!" enthused Britt. "You ought to get to know her better, Marty. She's a grand person, just now chuck full of ideas and plans for her wedding day."

Marty went taut in her saddle. "Her—wedding day? I had no idea. Then, she is going to be married soon?" There was a thin, small note in Marty's voice.

"The day we put water on Reservation Valley soil—that day Rose and Cass Partee get married. And are we going to make a celebration of it!"

Marty looked away and kept her face averted for some time. But the taut grip

of one slim hand on her saddle horn loosened. Her shoulders straightened and when she finally looked at Britt again her eyes were shining and faintly moist.

"I will get to know her better. Is this Cass Partee worthy of her?"

"You bet! They don't come any whiter than Cass. A pair to tie to, Cass and Rose."

At the forks of the town trail they parted, Britt continuing straight on to the southeast, Marty turning due south toward town. There was another mile of travel through the timber for Marty before the trail broke out into the valley clearings. And Marty rode almost gaily, singing a soft little song to herself, her head back as she watched the sunlight on the timber crests.

CHAPTER XIII

Deep Hills

WAKEFULLY Britt Larkin lay flat on his back on his blankets, watching the wheel of the stars across the night sky. He was deeply content. From a hazardous, uncertain start, things were working out better all the time. So much had depended on Alec Creager's position and now Alec had come around. The future looked good.

Of course there was still Jesse Schell and Dutch Klymer to consider, but with the newly announced position of Shield and Cross there was, it would seem, less to worry about all the time where Schell and Klymer figured.

Around Britt, also taking their ease, were Len Revis and Chuck and Harley Dodd, while old Sod Tremper was already snoring, sopping up sleep against a shift of guard duty, later on. Over yonder, some fifty yards away, the edge of the squatter camp began. Supper was long since over with and the fires had burned down to a few laggard coals, fading and graying to the final ash.

It was a weary camp, but a happy one. When the voices of men did sound there was a note of gruff content in them, for these men were fashioning a dream with the sweating strength of their backs and hands.

Out north of camp a guard called sharply into the night. Britt stirred, got up on one elbow, listening. Now came a shouted summons.

"Larkin! Britt Larkin!"

Britt sat up, pulled on his boots. Len Revis did the same and Harley and Chuck Dodd began to stir.

"Knew things were too nice to last," murmured Len. "I got a feeling!"

Britt headed across the dark, Len at his heels. Britt saw the figure of a rider, looming against the stars, with several squatters gathered around. Coming closer, Britt recognized the cast of the head and shoulders of that rider.

"Tom!" he exclaimed. "Tom Aden! What is it, Tom?"

Aden's voice was cold and quiet. "Riders in the night, Britt. May mean nothing, may mean a lot. Stony Cuff, ridin' line pretty deep in the hills, saw one bunch just at dusk, before he started back to headquarters. They went by above Stony, headin' east, toward your layout. Obe Widdens was leadin' 'em. They didn't see Stony and he had sense enough not to start anything, for he was way outnumbered and wouldn't have had a chance. Then Marty, when she got back from town, reported seein' Jesse Schell and half a dozen others, heading in for town. She rode wide to get around them, but she was sure it was Schell."

Aden paused a moment. "We wondered about it, Alec Creager and I did, and Marty, too. Alec said he could figure Schell ridin' to town, but he couldn't figure Obe Widdens and the others cuttin' out through the hills that way, with dark coming on. He thought you folks here ought to know about it. So I said I'd ride down and tell you about it. Then, not a mile after I left headquarters, I heard still another bunch coming. I got back in some jackpines and they went by within fifty yards of me. They were headin' this way, but staying in the edge of the timber, just above the open valley slopes. I let 'em get by, then dropped straight down into the valley and came in here, fast. Maybe it is a false alarm, maybe it doesn't mean a thing. But then

again, it might."

Britt, listening closely, visualizing the valley and the hills and the lines of direction these groups of riders had taken, nodded. "It could mean a lot, Tom. It could mean that tonight is the night of Jesse Schell's big try. He's been laying quiet for some time, but I've never tried to fool myself that he was going to fold up and quit without having a final try at putting over what he's wanted to do, all along, which is to run these folks out of Reservation Valley. And if, along the way, he gets the chance to kick a spoke out of my wheel, why, so much the better from the way he looks at it. Obe Widdens riding east, high up. Another bunch riding east, just above the valley edge. And Schell himself, in town with still another bunch. They could be figuring on getting on three sides of us."

"Take a look, Britt," said Harley Dodd tersely. "High up. North, just about on a line with where our headquarters."

"It is our headquarters," cut in Chuck Dodd. "Burnin'!"

HIGH up against the dark mass of the Royales a crimson glow had leaped into being, more of a tiny reflection against the black sky than anything else, dwarfed by the sheer immensity of background.

Len Revis swore softly. "Chuck's right. Now what?"

"Bait, maybe," said Britt Larkin quietly. "Figuring we'd see it and go charging back up there, which would thin down the ranks here. And then they would hit us. I think you boys got it figured, all right. That would be a typical Obe Widdens trick. But it won't work. By the time we got up there now, we'd be too late to do any good. But we can make it look as if we jumped for the bait."

Britt whirled. "Oake Calloway — Oake!"

"Right here, Britt." The deep voiced settler came pushing up.

"Get this camp organized for anything, Oake. Move the women and kids out, down to the river, with orders to lay low and keep quiet. Then post your men. If Schell's crowd attacks, they'll probably come in from more than one side. This could be it, Oake—the big showdown. Cass Partee, take Sod Tremper and a couple more and head for our dam. If that was blown on us now, it would hurt, plenty. I'm taking Len and Chuck and Harley and making a ride for it, like we were heading for our headquarters. Only, as soon as we break well up into the timber, we're cutting a circle that will put us down into the valley again, behind any crowd that might be coming in this way from town. If they're figuring on surprise, maybe they'll get some of the same."

Britt turned to Tom Aden. "If you would get back to Shield and Cross, Tom, and tell Alec Creager that if he'd care to take some of his crew and make a little night ride in this direction, it would be helpful."

"He'll come," said Aden. "And willingly. It was one of the things he wanted me to ask you, providing you figured this stirring around by Schell and Dutch Klymer meant anything. By that," and Aden nodded his head toward the distant glow, "it does. Tough on you, Britt, to have your headquarters go."

"It can be rebuilt," said Britt grimly. "And a small price to pay if this night we can clear the air, once and for all. Well, we got things to do. Let's be at them!"

Tom Aden swung his horse, disappeared into the night. Oake Calloway and Cass Partee hurried off to make their preparations. Britt and his men caught and saddled horses, then raced away as though drawn toward that distant glow, which was now high and bright, like moths toward a flame. They breasted the lifting slope of the valley, their broncs grunting with effort. They met the first ranks of the timber and plunged into it.

As he rode, conviction grew in Britt that he had guessed close to the strategy Jesse Schell and Dutch Klymer had figured out. Schell, seeing the way things had been shaping up, had realized he was not strong enough alone to carry out the full impact of his hate against the settlers, or against Britt, either. For Schell had lost the all important support of Alec Creager, had seen it even swinging against him. So he had brought in Dutch Klymer to help him, knowing the hatred Klymer had for Alec Creager, and aware of Klymer's rough and lawless ways.

With these things to be done, Schell had been laying low of late, waiting to

get organized. Now he was moving.

Deep in the timber, Britt began swinging west, slowing his horse. The Dodd boys and Len Revis pulled in beside him. "We take it easy and quiet from here," Britt told them.

"Suits me," murmured Len Revis. "Suits me fine. This rammin' along lickety-larrup, when we know such as Klymer and Widdens are ridin' the night, had me kind of edgy. There's such a thing as ridin' smack into a gun trap, you know, Britt."

"We passed the gun trap, back a piece," said Chuck Dodd drily. "Somebody was there, holed up in the timber."

"How do you know?" challenged Len.

"My bronc first, aimin' to throw its head and whistle," drawled Chuck. "Then, I smelled 'em. Got a whiff of them. Horses and men."

"Go on!" scoffed Len.

"Chuck's right," said Harley Dodd. "I smelled 'em, too."

LEN thought that over. "Then why didn't they open up on us?" he demanded.

"Because they're figuring just about like Britt guessed they would. They want us away from the settler camp when they jump it. Had they opened up, they wouldn't have got all of us, maybe not any of us and the sound of the shootin' would have carried as a warning. And what they're after is complete surprise."

"There's a heap of guessing goin' on around here," Len grumbled skeptically. "If we end up even half right, I'll be satisfied."

"Stay with us, Len," said Britt. "We'll know for sure before another sunrise."

"Oh, I'm staying with you," said Len crustily. "I wouldn't miss out on this for a new saddle."

They broke out of the timber several miles west of where they had gone into it. In the far distance they could see the lights of Fort Cord, but east along the valley, where Beaver Flats lay, all was dark.

Britt cut straight across the valley toward the Saber River. He tried to figure as Jesse Schell would figure, if he were in Schell's place and had in mind the things to do which Schell had. If Schell aimed to hit the settler camp from three sides, then he would come in from the south, for Widdens would be to the east, and Dutch Klymer to the north. And to get south of the camp, Schell would have to come in either along Saber River, or across it. Marty Creager had seen Schell heading for town, so the chances were strong that Schell would come down along the river trail from Fort Cord.

From well out in the valley, Britt twisted in his saddle and looked back, back and high. Up there in the deep hills the glow of fire was fading. A gust of cold anger ran through Britt. The old headquarters. Gone. Burned. At Schell's orders, no doubt, and by Schell's men. It hadn't been so much, as headquarters went, but it had been home. And as such was tied to a man. Jesse Schell was laying up a heavy debt he'd have to settle for.

They were within a couple of hundred yards of the river when Harley Dodd called softly, "Hold it! Watch your broncs. Don't let 'em whistle!"

They reined in, listening, and they heard, out there in front of them, the rushing tempo of driving hoofs. Britt felt the barrel of his horse swell beneath him and he leaned far forward, to pull the animal's head around and dig fingers into its nostrils, to keep the animal silent.

There was no mistaking that furious rush of hoofs. "Good ol' Jesse!" murmured Len Revis. "Never did learn to ride easy and care for horseflesh, like sensible men do. Always at a tearing rush, and devil take the broncs or anybody in his way. Harley, you and Chuck are plenty good. Regular danged cats in the dark. I never heard a thing until you said to listen."

The Running S contingent sped by and Britt and his party fell in behind them, following, but at a more cautious pace, for soon even Jesse Schell would have to pull down from that furious run or advertise to all ahead that he was coming.

Chuck and Harley took the lead, lean, quiet men with strangely sharpened senses and instincts. The night now had become strangely still, almost a brooding stillness, as though all creation were waiting breathlessly for some sudden and violent upheaval. To Britt Larkin it seemed as though some sort of savage current was flowing, a strange, electric

thing which got into a man and ran along his nerve ends, which drew him up, taut and quivering inside and set the hair to bristling along the back of his neck.

Britt found his eyes aching with the strain of peering ahead into the darkness, his ears roaring with a silence that was potent and surely temporary. He felt he would be almost glad when the first break of sound came, even if it be the roar of guns. Anything to break the rising, racking strain.

Inexorably the slow pacing of their horses brought them closer to Beaver Flats. And just as surely, out there somewhere between them and Beaver Flats was that bunch of riders who had stormed past them, not so long ago. When would this thing break?

The first sound came from far away, the first hint of what the night was to hold for the men of Reservation Valley. Gunshots, thin with distance, but sharply challenging.

"The gorge!" exclaimed Len Revis. "Cass Partee has got a ruckus on his hands out there. The lid's comin' off!"

THOSE distant gun shots could have been a signal, for now the lid did come off with a bang. North a yell lifted, harsh, high-pitched, threatening. And an answering yell, out ahead of Britt and his men, heavy, rolling. Jesse Schell's voice!

"Now it starts!" called Harley Dodd crisply, "We'll be better off on foot for a time, Britt. Remember, the settlers will be shootin' at everything in a saddle!"

"We'll Indian tie 'em," said Chuck. "Then our broncs will stay put."

They went out of their saddles and Chuck and Harley made the Indian tie quickly, leaving the four horses in a tight little group, head to head. This way they could not stampede.

Out ahead, shooting had started, the long roll of guns splitting the night wide open and men were yelling, the voices of the settlers taunting and defiant, while the heavy, rage filling roarings of Jesse Schell told that the surprise attack he had hoped for was not going according to schedule.

Britt Larkin raced ahead on foot, following the crouched, shadowy figures of Chuck and Harley Dodd. Len Revis pounded at Britt's heels. A riderless horse burst out of the dark, tearing past, empty stirrups tossing. Some embattled settler had shot straighter than he dreamed.

Out ahead the uproar deepened. The roll of guns was a steady, hard crashing, the sharp, ripping reports of ries, the shorter, flatter thudding of six-guns. And the wild yelling of surprised, confused and thwarted riders.

Abruptly there were riders whirling and dashing around Britt and his men. One of the riders yelled, "Look out, Jesse! The sod-busters got men behind us!"

There was no mistaking that hoarse, grating voice. Duke Nulk!

Duke Nulk was shooting, even as he yelled, and his lead whipped the black earth around Britt. It was Harley Dodd who snapped a swift, single shot in return, as he caught the loom of Nulk against the stars. Nulk's hoarse shout broke off abruptly and then there was another riderless horse racing wildly.

After that things got wild indeed. Twice Britt Larkin nearly got run down by riders lashing their way through the night, breaking before the solid resistance in front and the new surprise threat from the rear. Britt dodged and ducked and scrambled, losing contact with the Dodds and Len Revis. Guns flared and pounded and, though Britt tried two snap shots himself, he was dodging even as he fired and knew that he missed each time.

Out there in the dark Jesse Schell was raging madly. He had planned this thing carefully and had been sure of its success. In his contemptuous estimate of the settler he had figured them spiritless, spineless men who might put up a bluff at resistance but who would cave swiftly under real attack.

But they had not caved. They were fighting back grimly, savagely, giving not an inch of ground. Schell had figured on complete surprise and had himself ridden into a trap, it seemed. For now there were men behind him, as well as in front. Some of his own men had gone down, the rest were breaking.

Schell cursed them, raging bitterly, trying to rally them. But it did no good. What Jesse Schell had never stopped to

realize was that these men of his were only fighting for wages, while the settlers out in front were fighting for a dream, a future, for something they were building out of this sage desert, something into which they had already put days of toil and sweat and fervor. It made a difference, a vast difference. Abruptly Jesse Schell realized he was alone.

He rose high in his stirrups, hurling roaring curses as well as lead at that thin but unyielding half circle of gunfire in front of him. Grim faced men shot back at his gun flashes. A slug told solidly on his horse and the stricken animal whirled and bolted, beginning to falter and weaken in its stride before it had gone fifty yards. Schell sensed that the animal was going down and he swung clear just in time, hitting his feet floundering and stumbling as the horse went rolling over with a crash.

GUIDED by the roaring invective and rage which he had heard Jesse Schell throwing at the settlers, at his own men and at fate which mocked him, Britt Larkin had been working his way through the night toward Schell. He heard Schell's horse come rushing toward him wildly, heard the animal fall as its stride broke and the strength went out of it. And now he heard Jesse Schell stumbling and thrashing his way along, like a bear gone berserk.

Britt knew it was Schell, for he knew this man, knew his insensate rage at frustration and defeat, knew his heavy flounderings and the thick, bitter cursing. And he also knew that as long as this man lived, there would never be peace.

The immediate tumult had faded. Britt had the feeling that just now he and Jesse Schell were all alone in this black night, and as though destiny had pulled the strings here, pushed the puppets around there and so manipulated matters as to have him and Jesse Schell come face to face at this spot and this moment.

He hardly realized that he was calling to Schell, taunting him. For there was no mercy in him for Jesse Schell at this moment. Britt was remembering that glow, far back in the deep hills. Jesse Schell had ordered that fire—the burning of Britt's home. And Britt was remembering something else, words that Tom Aden had spoken.

"Never use your fists on an animal—that's what guns were made for!"

At no time had Britt actually seen Schell, so now, as Schell's gun blared, it was startlingly close. Schell was shooting at the sound of Britt's voice, searching the dark wickedly with flailing lead. The slug that whipped along Britt's ribs, spun him half around, leaving numbness first, then a fiery burning, as though a white hot iron had been dragged against him.

Britt dropped to one knee, felt another bullet pluck at a loose fold of his shirt. He shot back, straight into the flare of Jesse Schell's gun, shot again and again until, of a sudden, he realized the hammer of his weapon was falling against spent and empty cartridges.

There was no answering fire. There was no more roaring and cursing and heavy trampling. There was nothing but the night and strained quiet here, with all shooting far away to the north and to the east.

Britt got to his feet, went forward, stumbled over something. As he crouched down he heard Len Revis call:

"Britt! You all right, Britt?"

"Yeah," Britt answered. "Over here, Len. Come over here."

Len came over, found him. "What is it? Who's down?"

Even as Len asked, the match that Britt had just struck, flared into thin flame. Jesse Schell lay on his face. He lay very still.

Len stood up and yelled, "Over here, Chuck—Harley! Bring the broncs over here. Britt just got Jesse Schell!"

CHAPTER XIV

Water On The Earth

LATER, grimly silent, they rode north where fighting was still going on. Britt said nothing to his men of being hit, the wound seeming of small consequence at the moment, aside from the seeping wetness of blood running down his side.

From the sound of

things it was apparent that Dutch Klymer and his crowd had had no better luck at breaking into the settler camp than Jesse Schell had. Surprise had backfired on them as well as on Schell. So, after the first hot reception at the hands of the settlers, during which they had lost one man, Klymer and his men gave back a little, then held their ground, trading shot for shot.

But Dutch Klymer was growing uneasy. Something was badly out of joint where Jesse Schell had struck from the south and west. Schell had not broken into the settler camp as they figured he surely would. And now the shooting was beginning to fade out and stop down there. Over west, Obe Widdens and the men with him were smoking it up all right, but Schell—what had happened to Schell?

Dutch Klymer stuffed fresh cartridges into the magazine of his rifle, then emptied the weapon in a series of measured, deliberate shots, reaching at the gun flashes of the settlers out front. And as his weapon snarled and jolted his shoulder in recoil on the final shot he heard, whipping down the valley slope, the hard roll of massed, speeding hoofs. And a yell came out ahead of the pound of hoofs.

"Shield and Cross coming in! Shield and Cross!"

Dutch Klymer whirled, shouted to his men, "Break for it—break for it! The night's gone wrong!"

Spurring his horse with every jump, Klymer cut away up the lift of the valley, aiming for the sanctuary of the timber. But Shield and Cross, with frosty browed, grim faced Alec Creager leading, came in at an angle which threw them squarely in Klymer's path.

There was a wild melee of men and horses as the two outfits came together. Alec Creager, shooting his way through, drove close range lead at a horseman who loomed close before him and never guessed until later that those two shots settled the feud between him and Dutch Klymer forever.

By the time Britt Larkin and his men reached the spot, Shield and Cross was in full control. Shouted reassurances of identity brought realization that the carefully figured out attack by Jesse Schell had frittered away into complete failure.

Even over to the east the shooting died out as Obe Widdens, crafty as a mountain cat, knew now that defeat had overtaken the raiders, and so slipped away, snarling his bitter, frustrated hate.

Sending their identifying shouts ahead of them, Britt Larkin, Alec Creager and all their men, rode down into the settler camp. Patrols were sent out to circle and search, found the night empty. The attacking forces had vanished. So fires sprang up in the camp and the cost of the night was assessed.

Three of the settlers were wounded, none seriously. Oake Calloway had done a shrewd job of laying out his defenses. His men had been low to the ground and this position, plus the darkness, had been their bulwark. The settlers were jubilant. The brought their women folks and youngsters in from the river hideout and some tears mingled with the rejoicing.

ROSE CALLOWAY, her face white, her lips taut, came over to Britt and said a single word. "Cass?"

"My boys have gone out to the gorge to relieve Cass and Sod Tremper and the others who were guarding the dam," Britt told her. "Don't worry, Rose. Cass will be all right."

Which was true enough, for a little later Cass Partee came in, anxious about the others, but unhurt himself. Yet, behind him came Chuck and Harley Dodd, Chuck walking and leading his horse. Across the saddle a gaunt, limp figure was tied. Old Sod Tremper. Sod was dead, shot through the heart.

It was the settler's only loss.

"Some of the folks have been wondering right along what we should call our dam," said Oake Calloway a little later. "Now we know. It will be Tremper Dam, a lasting monument to a brave and faithful friend."

Len Revis came up beside Britt Larkin, who stood just at the rim of light of one of the fires. He said, "What are you so quiet about, boy? Not lettin' that Schell affair bother you too much, are you?"

Britt did not answer, for at that moment his knees began to buckle. Len caught him as he fell. "Thunderation!" rapped Len. "He's been hit all this time

and said nothing. Make room there, Britt's been hit!"

BRITT did not go all the way out, but very close to it. He had lost more blood than he thought. They worked over him, washing the wound, then bandaging it. They made a deep nest of blankets for him, covered him with others. He drifted off into something that was half sleep, half stupor. When he came back to realities, the sun was shining and Len Revis was there with a cup of coffee for him. After which, Len and Cass Partee took him over and put him down again in the shade of a wagon.

"I don't need to be packed around like an infant," mumbled Britt. "Let me out of these blankets."

"You stay right where you're put until I say different," Len Revis told him. "I've had such a chore raisin' you this long, I ain't takin' any chances. Shut up and go to sleep."

To his own surprise, this was just what Britt did and it was well along in the afternoon when he again awoke. This time the strange fuzziness that had been in his head was gone and everything was in sharp, clear focus again. He heard the low murmur of feminine voices nearby, rolled his head and saw Marty Creager talking to Rose Calloway. They caught the movement of his head and Marty came over, dropped on one knee beside him. Her eyes were very big and soft and solemn.

"How do you feel, Britt?" Marty asked.

"Great, with you here. See if you can get that pig-headed Len Revis to let me get out of these blankets. I can't lay around here forever like this. There's work to do."

"Maybe tomorrow, maybe the next day, we'll let you get back on your feet, Britt Larkin. But not one second sooner. So, behave yourself and quit being peevish."

"If you'll sit along side of me and hold my hand I'm willing to stay put," said Britt.

Marty colored, deeply, but dimpled slightly. "If I had any worries about you before, I've none now," she declared. "The same old Britt Larkin, fresh as they come. Very well, I'll sit here a while, but I won't hold your hand."

"Stubborn," growled Britt. "Stubborn as all get out. Anyway, you can't stop me from looking at you."

Men toiled through summer days that were moving into fall. Britt Larkin toiled with them. His wound had healed, he was lean and sinewy and brown, his eyes clear and exuberant. Across Saber River in the gorge a dam stood now, complete. For several days the water in the river below the dam had thinned to a mere trickle, the steady rumble of White Thunder Falls faded to little more than a murmur. The lake above the dam grew in length and depth, lipping ever higher and higher, until finally it began spilling over. Then the falls again took up their booming song and normal flow swept the river bed once more.

Across the valley floor wide acres of land stood barren of sagebrush. Len Revis and the Dodd brothers, Harley and Chuck, had ridden down to Button Willow to meet some carloads of cattle coming in on the railroad. In Beaver Flats preparations were going on for another fandango and for even gayer celebration. Invitations had been broadcast by word of mouth. And so the great day arrived.

Alec and Marty Creager and their Shield and Cross hands came riding down out of the Royales and met, coming across the valley, a herd of white-faced cattle, driven by Len Revis and the Dodd brothers. Not a very big herd, but all prime young breeding stock. Heavy chunky animals, hardy and bred for beef.

Len Revis, gray with dust, came grining out of the drag. "What do you think of 'em, Alec? You'll be ashamed to peek at one of them cross-bred mongrel cows of yours in the face after lookin' over some real cattle."

The frosty browed cattleman cleared his throat sternly, but his eyes twinkled. "Don't get too proud, Len. I ain't rightly made up my mind yet, whether my new herd will be Herefords or Durhams. There's some who claim the Durham the best. Maybe they're right."

Rigs churned up the valley from Fort Cord, bringing Henry Castro, Hack Dinwiddie, Sam Garfield and his wife along with other solid citizens. The squatter women wore their finest, the men their best and the children were scrubbed until they shone. Also, a traveling parson had been rounded up.

UP IN the gorge Oake Calloway set some final powder charges and he and Britt Larkn lighted the fuses.

"This is it, Britt," Calloway rumbled as they scrambled back to a safe distance. "We'll let the folks down below get a good look at the water hitting through that ditch, then we'll drop the sluice gate, have our celebration and then start gettin' cabins built against the winter. There's still a lot of work to do, but come next summer this valley will be a garden spot. All my life I been yearnin' to see corn and hay and green crops growin' on land that'll never have to get thirsty for water. Now I'm goin' to."

Hard, crackling thunder rolled along the gorge. A thin haze of rock dust lifted and water from the lake swept through where the last stubborn ledge of the lateral cut had stood. Down in the valley folks were grouped along the edge of the ditch cut by the Fresno scrapers. From the top of a wall of the gorge, Britt Larkin and Oake Calloway watched those waiting folks.

It took time for that water to sweep along the gulch and then out into the man made ditch but the flow was full and strong, though only a small part of the normal river volume. Dry and thirsty earth sucked at it as it went by, but however much the earth took up on this first drink, it could not begin to take it all. And so, presently, there was excitement among those groups below, with children running up and down beside the ditch—all of this telling Britt and Calloway that the water had reached there and was driving by.

"I'll bet there's a deep shine in the eyes of my neighbor folk," said Calloway, a husky note in his voice. "We've traveled a long and weary way for this, and never thought we'd see it outside our dreams."

"Water and earth and sunshine, Oake!" Britt nodded. "The answer to all life."

After a while they dropped the stout log-made sluice gate and the water ran away, and the thirsty earth drank and the ditch went empty. But it would fill again, whenever the need was there. The major task was done.

Britt and Calloway went down to the Flats. Now came a simple, quiet ceremony. Cass Partee and Rose Calloway stood before the traveling parson and made their vows. Rose had never been more serenely lovely. Some of the older women wept, but it was with happiness. Britt looked at Marty Creager and saw that her eyes were moistly bright, too.

Len Revis, Chuck and Harley Dodd came riding in just at sundown. "We pushed the white-faces into the first park we hit," reported Len. "They'll stay there, on the first good grass they've hit since leavin' Button Willow. Then we come on back to get in on the celebration. And, Britt, on the way in we picked up Loney Pike, who used to cook for the Running S. Now, since that outfit has come all apart at the seams, what with Jese Schell dead and done with, Loney is like some lost and bewildered pup. The pore little devil, he never was against us. Ain't there somethin' we can do for him?"

"Where is he?" asked Britt.

"Yonder, lookin' all alone and sort of hopeless like."

Loney Pike was a thin, whiskery little old fellow with sad and hopeless eyes. "Where you headin', Loney?" asked Britt.

Loney shrugged thin shoulders. "Jest to see you a minute, Britt. After that, I dunno. Jobs ain't many for a man of my age."

"What did you want to see me about, Loney?"

"Jest to tell you to keep an eye open for Obe Widdens. He ain't skipped the country like the rest of them did after the big fracas here in the valley when Jesse Schell and Dutch Klymer were rubbed out. No, sir, Widdens is still prowlin' the Royales, aimin' to get a lick at you, Britt. So you keep an eye skinned for him. He's all rattlesnake, Widdens is."

"Why, thanks, Loney, for telling me that. I've wondered about Widdens many times since the big fight. I'm obliged for this warning and I sure will keep a lookout. Now about that job you're looking for. You got one, right now. You're going to cook for me, Loney. Len Revis and the Dodd boys and me, we're going to be plenty busy in the future and we'll be needing a cook, just about your size and ability. I don't want no young smart alec cook. I want a man who knows his way around a bread oven and a bean pot. You're it."

"I ain't askin' for charity," said Loney. "I can hold up my end of the chore."

"Sure you can, Loney. That's why I want you. A deal?"

Loney's thin shoulders straightened. "It's a deal."

"Swell! Now go mix with the folks and have some fun."

LONEY PIKE went, his head up, his eyes terrier bright. Loney was a man among men again.

Someone behind Britt said softly, "You are a thoroughly kind man, Britt Larkin."

Britt turned. It was Marty Creager. Britt hadn't seen a great deal of Marty after he got back on his feet again from the effects of his wound and had tied so completely into the final finishing of the main project. Which hadn't been entirely Britt's fault, for Marty had been elusive and full of a baffling mystery that Britt could not fully fathom.

Now he took hold of her arm, and led her away from the settler camp, out into the deepening blue dusk that was flooding the world. Marty did not object, moving along beside him, lithe and straight and graceful.

"Just so you won't slide away again," he said. "You and me are going to have a real down-to-earth talk, young lady. Anybody would think you were mad at me, the way you been avoiding me. Maybe you are, but I wouldn't know what for."

She smiled in the dusk. "No, Britt, not mad. Not a bit mad. Just getting to understand myself."

"And you do, now?"

She nodded. "My mind is made up on many things. Now, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Tomorrow the boys and I start rebuilding our headquarters. In a way, I'm not too sorry that Jess Schell ordered it burned. It never was too much of a layout before and if it had stood there'd always have been the ghost of that poor old devil of a Jed Sharpe hangin' from the ridge pole. But the fire wiped out all of that and now I can make it a new start. What I'm getting at is this. Do we build it as a bachelor layout again, or would you like to have a say in how big and which way it will be set up?"

Marty was silent for a moment. Then, "Why should I have any say? Why should I?"

"Because I been hoping you'd be the mistress of that headquarters, Marty. In which case, you'd sure want to have a say on the layout of it."

They had moved quite a distance from the camp. Down there fires were burning, bright beacons of the fulfillment of men's hopes and future happiness. Marty stared at them. Finally she tirred.

She said, "That day you rode out of town with me, when we fought—and I went to hit you with my quirt—and you said things, and did things."

"Sure," said Britt. "I told you I loved you and kissed you to prove it."

The powder blue of the twilight was turning to a deep, warm dark. It was the best moment of the day, the moment for young folks to understand each other.

"Do you still mean what you said then? Do you still feel the same way, Britt?" Marty's voice was very soft.

"Still do, and always, Marty."

She leaned a trifle toward him. "You can prove it again, Britt. And I certainly will want a say in the layout of our new headquarters."

She was slim and very precious in his arms, and the world stood still.

And then it was Obe Widdens' voice, harsh and mocking and wicked that was hammering at Britt's consciousness.

"Sweet!" mocked Widdens. "Very sweet and fetching. But useless, Larkin, useless. I been waiting a long time for this chance!"

The rage that burst through Britt was like white fire, and in the blaze of it he understood so many things. He understood that he had been a fool not to have had Obe Widdens hunted down like the vicious human wolf he was, or at least driven completely from the country. He understood that to a man like Widdens, the satisfying of a personal hate and grudge was more important than anything else.

He understood that Widdens had come stealing down through the dusk to hang about the fringe of the camp of the celebrating settlers to wait his chance for fulfilling that grudge and hate. He understood that in leading Marty away from the camp he had moved straight into Widdens' hands. And finally, he under-

stood that he was unarmed and that Widdens had him cold and that at this moment his life wasn't worth a thin dime.

WHAT Britt did next was the product of pure instinct and desperation. He threw Marty away from him, threw her so violently she tripped and fell headlong. He had to get her out of the line of fire! And with the same violent move, he whirled and lunged, low and driving.

He had placed Widdens by the sound of the renegade's voice. That same voice had told him Widdens was close. It was all a gamble—reckless, desperate, savage.

The crimson tongue and blare of report of Widdens' gun half blinded him and bludgeoned his ears to a ringing ache. But he didn't feel the shock of a hit. He head Widdens curse, saw the thin, high bulk of the fellow try and step back as he chopped down for a second shot. Britt took another stride and hurled himself like a projectile, head long and knee high.

He felt his shoulder crash into Widdens' knees, heard the roar of the renegade's second shot. Then he had Widdens down and rolling on the ground with him. He was remembering the gun and he grabbed for Widdens' wrist. He got the arm, halfway between wrist and elbow. It was crooking toward him for a desperate third shot. Britt pushed it away and in, twisting.

The gun bellowed a third time, inches from Britt's face, the flame scorching him. Still he wasn't hit, and he worried Widdens madly, trying to get the gun away from him.

It came, suddenly and with surprising ease. For Widdens had gone limp and flaccid. That bird shot, the gun twisted down and in just as it went off, had slashed angling through Widdens' heart. The man was dead.

Britt was staggering as he got to his feet. He was weak, gasping for breath. In brief, flashing, desperate seconds he had expended so much effort he reeled when he walked. Marty was getting to her feet.

"Girl—girl!" groaned Britt, "I didn't mean to be rough with you. But I had to get you out of line. Marty girl!"

She was steadier than he was. She put her arms around him. "You're not hit? Oh, my dearest, you're not hit!"

They were still clinging to each other, with Marty sobbing her thankfulness when Len Revis and others, charging up from the camp, found them.

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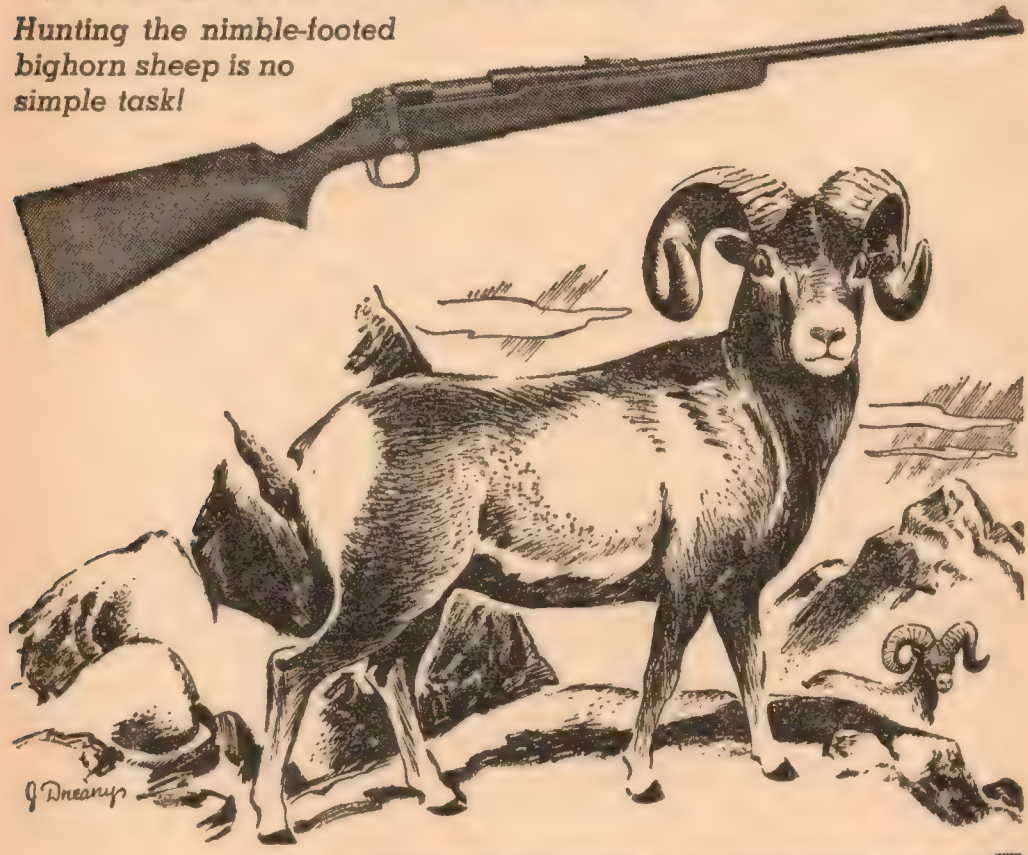
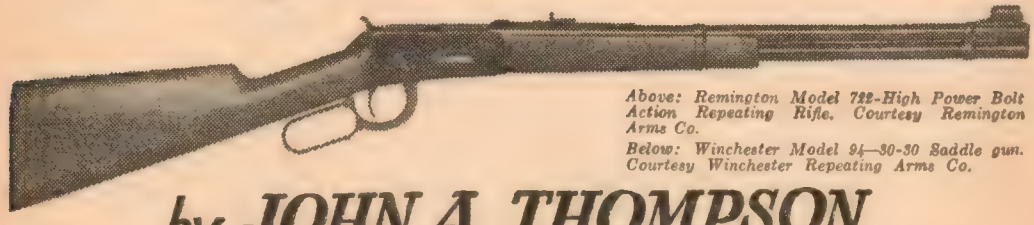
Mountain Mutton

Hunting the nimble-footed bighorn sheep is no simple task!





Above: Remington Model 722-High Power Bolt Action Repeating Rifle. Courtesy Remington Arms Co.

Below: Winchester Model 94—30-30 Saddle gun. Courtesy Winchester Repeating Arms Co.

by JOHN A. THOMPSON

THE nimble-hoofed bighorn sheep is Nature's mountaineer, his habitat the dizzy crags and highest peaks of our tallest mountain ranges. And it takes a mountaineer to bag one.

Make no mistake about the bighorn. In manner, cunning and wariness he bears little resemblance to his woolly-coated and much smaller domesticated cousin. The bighorn sheep is a real big game animal. At close quarters an angered bighorn ram can actually be dangerous to man.

There are stories on record of lonely prospectors and even hunters mauled to

death or ripped to shreds by the horns and flailing hoofs of a bighorn they thought they had killed—but instead had only wounded. This occasional grim vengeance for man's relentless slaughter of their kind is a chapter in the saga of the bighorn that is seldom touched upon either by hunters, guides or outfitters in sheep country. Yet the experienced know the truth and are fully aware of the danger that exists.

Bighorns Are Hard to Bag

Stalking a bighorn in its steep-rocked mountain top hideouts is no game for armchair sportsmen.

Nowadays sportsmen hunt bighorn sheep for two reasons. They are rare, and hard to get. And their full-caped heads and massive, circular horns make spectacular trophies when mounted and hung in the owner's den or hunting lodge. Moreover any bighorn bagged these days is a tribute to a hunter's shooting skill and his merit as an all-around wilderness country outdoorsman.

Modern hunters have to go far afield to find the last remaining haunts of our dwindling bands of bighorn sheep, generally to the jagged perpendicular, sheer rock, snow-capped peaks of the Talkeetna mountains north of Anchorage in Alaska. Or perhaps the rugged mountain and canyon country of the Yalakom river area in British Columbia, some two hundred air miles from Vancouver. Or the high crests of the Canadian Rockies.

It wasn't always so. Back easily within the memory of many an old-time Westerner—prospector and mountain country rancher alike—mountain mutton was a not infrequent big-game table meat. Earlier still these beautiful, shy, wild members of the sheep family provided an important, staple food supply for trappers and the Indian tribes living in their range. The bighorn, like the swift and graceful antelope of the plains country, was once aboundant in the West. Too abundant for his own good and the eventual, inevitable settling of that rich frontier.

Sheep Dare New Perils

Settlement of the country besides diminishing his numbers to where his very existence has been threatened, also forced him off the lower, grassy ranges he once used for winter and sometimes year-round pasture. Gradually the bighorn has been pushed back to his present almost inaccessible home among the higher peaks, or in rugged canyons that are hard for man to reach.

Even this flight against the encroachment of civilization, though it took the bighorn out of range of the pot-shot hunter's guns, lessened in other ways his chances for survival. It moved him from his former richest grass feed, and brought him up into the natural lair of such predatory animals as the mountain lion. It took him up to the last haunts of the great, talon-clawed golden eagles.

Eagles Decimate Bighorns

Next to man, armed with a modern rifle, the golden eagle strangely enough is the mountain sheep's greatest enemy. These huge, and in their own way magnificent birds, protected by law and sentiment, consistently swoop down on the young lambs of bighorn sheep and kill them with their ripping talons and powerful beak. Often they carry young lambs to their mountain top eyries for their voracious little eaglets to feed on.

Ask almost any western conservation official, game warden, or forest ranger in the bighorn country of the West. Though few have actually witnessed the eagles in the act, they will tell you this is so. Most of them have seen, at one time or another, the conclusive evidence of mountain lamb bones whitening in the sun underneath the eagles' nests.

In spite of all this the range of the bighorn sheep, essentially a rocky, mountain rather than a timbered country animal, is more extensive than many hunters realize. Though most of his range in our West is at present closed to bighorn hunting or open only on a limited and highly restricted basis, bands of the big sheep can still be found from the mountain country well below the Mexican border on up close to the Arctic ocean in the little known snow-covered mountain ranges that rise across the white wastes of Alaska's northern extremity.

This was pretty much his original habitat, but he formerly lived in it in much greater numbers than he does today. At

least as far as the West is concerned, where he now lives for the most part high above timber line both summer and winter. During deep snow time, he clings precariously yet with lordly sure-footedness to the windswept, bare ridges. In summer he may venture down into the high, well-watered grassy swales and meadows that lie at the upper edge of the timber mark. Even so he keeps close to rocky crags and the seemingly unscalable cliffs that are his swift refuge in case of danger.

And it is in late summer or early fall that he is usually hunted in those sections where open seasons on mountain sheep are at present available. Alaska has a short open season the latter part of August. In Alberta, British Columbia and northern Canada generally but with some special exceptions the season runs from mid-August to mid-November.

The true bighorn, *ovis canadensis,* is no baby either. A six-year-old adult ram is likely to weigh, on the average, about three hundred pounds. Even larger and heavier specimens undoubtedly exist. The record bighorn head, bagged about twenty years ago in British Columbia, came from a ram that weighed well over the three-hundred-pound average. It had rich, heavy, full-curved black horns with a front curve length of 48½ inches and a base circumference of 16 inches. The spread from outer edge of horn to horn was almost 24 inches.

Great Skill Needed

But don't be disappointed if you bag a bighorn whose horns measure only anywhere from 36 to 40 inches from base to tip along the outside curve. That's still a topflight trophy ram, and considerably bigger than the average.

The Dall sheep, a species fairly numerous in Alaska, has smaller horns than *ova canadensis,* and is a smaller animal all around.

But any mountain sheep ram bagged today is a trophy that takes the hunter out of the tyro class.

Hunting bighorns is almost a wilderness explorer's job. It takes a hunter into rocky ranges where nothing other than a yen for mountain climbing or the lure of the bighorn would ever bring him. Often it means scaling high cliffs, and camping out in barren, rugged gorges, sometimes for days on end. Very likely it entails a trying preliminary reconnaissance, studying distant peaks and crags through powerful binoculars for the sight of a band of sheep until your weary eyes blink, and you begin to see things that simply aren't there.

Hunters Must Be Wary

When you use the binoculars, don't make the novice's mistake of standing up on a prominent point and sweeping the country with your glasses. Aside from the fact that you'll soon get tired, your flagpole position is a dead giveaway to any sheep that might be in the vicinity. Mountain sheep have sharp eyes, and keen senses. Once they get wind of a hunter, the chances are they'll be gone to the deep recesses in the high crags where a man would need a balloon to reach them. And gone moreover before the hunter has even been aware of their presence in the range.

Lie flat, or sit with your back against a blending rock. You can scan the country longer through glasses that way without getting tired. And you won't be seen so easily by the wary sheep. Look for the animals themselves of course. But also look for dim telltale sheep trails that denote a possible band of sheep in the vicinity.

Mountain sheep are not really migratory animals. Unless driven out by fear, their sense of danger or lack of subsistence forage, an individual sheep band will restrict its range to a relatively small local mountain area.

And it will spend most of its life within the limits of this range.

Sheep Not Easily Seen

Moreover when you start your long vigil with the glasses, don't expect to spot sheep limned against the skyline in solitary majesty every time—the way they are usually portrayed in pictures. Chances are they won't even be standing up unless they are moving. The sheep may be lying down in a hard-to-distinguish blob against rocks, or bunched in a bedded-down group that looks more like a pile of rocks from the distance than your eagerly sought quarry.

Once you have spotted a band of mountain sheep, and picked out tentatively your trophy ram the next job—and believe me it's no child's chore—is to get within accurate shooting distance of the animal. This usually means crawling for hours along jagged rock, or cautious, deliberate moving towards the bunch. Keep out of sight, if possible. Mountain sheep are reputed to have the keenest vision of any animal in North America.

If you must move in sight of the band, stay in sight. Don't disappear, then reappear with disconcerting suddenness. That will startle the creatures surely, and send them kiting off to the highest peak. And it will probably be a day or two at least before they finally venture back into the vicinity of their old location.

Make as little noise as possible during your stalk, and whatever you do, make no quick, disturbing movements. Don't hurry the job. Take an hour to cover a quarter of a mile, if necessary—or even a hundred yards in extremely rugged country.

Plan Your Stalk

Insofar as it is possible plan the general route of your stalk in advance. Take note of prominent landmarks and make these your successive objectives in getting closer and closer to the sheep. And don't, if you can help it, move directly towards the band. Pick out a spot to one side or other of the band and angle into gunshot range, like a ship stealing along on a long tack.

And finally, though this is not always feasible in the high mountain peaks that are sheep country, whenever you can make your stalk from a point above the sheep and move downhill towards them. Alarmed sheep almost invariably make a skip to higher ground. Thus, if you are above them to start with and they do make a move, the chances are they will be coming up towards your level, rather than getting higher and higher above you.

At the start of the stalk the sheep band when first sighted may be as far as two or three miles away. As a rule the closest you can get to a ram means at best a long range shot—generally in the vicinity of 300 yards, or over. For such shooting any sportsman is fully justified in using 'scope sights on his rifle. In fact they are a necessity for any but the most experienced and sharp-eyed of hunters, if a one shot kill in a vital area is to be made.

There was a time, especially in the West, back when sheep were plentiful and mountain mutton was a regular part of the wild game menu for wilderness prospectors, ranchers, and hunters in bighorn country that the 30-30, Winchester's famous old "saddle gun" was used on sheep with good results. The 30-30 has brought down many a trophy ram, or mess of mountain mutton in its day.

Times Have Changed

But that was when the shooting range was likely to be much shorter than it is under modern sheep hunting conditions, and sheep were often brought down by still hunters lying in wait at favored water-holes or salt licks.

Nowadays perhaps the most important consideration in a big game rifle to be used in bighorn hunting should be a gun that

[*Turn page*]

handles a high speed cartridge with a flat trajectory and plenty of killing power behind it. Excellent in this class are the .270 Winchester using a 130-grain bullet, the .257 Roberts with an 87-grain bullet, and the 30-06 using a 150-grain bullet.

Any one of these rifles should bring in that coveted ram at 300 yards or better. All fire swift, relatively flat shots at that distance. The .257 Roberts 87-grain bullet, for instance, has a mid-range trajectory of only 6 inches at 300 yards. Over the same distance the .30-06 with a 150-grain bullet had a trajectory just slightly higher—6½ inches at mid-range.

Because of the range at which mountain sheep are usually killed the best shot is to aim for the chest cavity, when possible. Neck and head shots depend for their effectiveness on breaking the spine or entering the brain. These are virtually pinpoint targets on a mountain sheep perhaps close to a quarter of a mile away. And they are risky for any but the most expert of hunters and rifle shots.

Moreover field conditions are far different from those that prevail on target rifle ranges. Few even among crack shots can consistently put a bullet squarely into the brain or neck target offered by a mountain sheep at long range.

In our own West there are perhaps little more than 15,000 bighorns left, the penalty in part of our tardiness individually and as a nation in realizing the importance of a sound game conservation and wildlife management program. Today they are generally protected, and their numbers are expanding.

Of the bighorns left—about 9,000 Rocky Mountain bighorns and perhaps 6,000 desert bighorns—Wyoming and Colorado have the largest herds. Possibly close to 3,000 bighorns each. Idaho has nearly 2,000; Montana well over 1,000; California over 300; Utah over 200; Oregon and Washington about 30 each, and New Mexico some time ago had a count of 3.

Herds Are Rare

Among the desert bighorns California leads with 2,000 or more. Arizona has close to 2,000; Nevada more than 1,000; New Mexico has about 300 and there are perhaps 200 in the high mountain country of West Texas.

Conservation officials as well as representatives of the Wildlife Management Institute (a private organization dedicated to all phases of better use, development, and restoration of our once abundant wildlife resources) are watching the growth of these remaining bighorn herds with keen interest.

Colorado particularly has been making considerable progress in extending the range of its bighorn sheep by transplanting animals from fully stocked ranges to depleted or understocked areas throughout the State. A season or so ago one of the largest transplantings was made when 32 bighorns from the original Tarryall herd were moved to a mountain near Georgetown. Others have been moved to the Sangre de Cristo range in the south-central part of the State, to Cache La Poudre valley, to Green Winter falls north of Pike's Peak and to the Mesa Verde National Park. All the transplanted herds appear to be doing nicely, and are growing in numbers.

Fight Against Extermination

As a matter of fact, though there is hardly a fraction left of the game it might have had, the rugged, back country wilderness West still provides a fair share of good big game hunting. It may well be that intelligent wildlife management and restoration can turn the corner of past depletion. It already has in some instances.

However to do this, wildlife management must be maintained. Its importance must be fully understood, by individuals as well as officials.

Only so long as this is done and permissible game crops are kept below the annual increase, or the ability of their range to support them, will there be continued hunting in the West. It is the only way to keep alive the great hunting tradition that is our heritage.

Moreover it applies to other once familiar wild creatures of the West as well as it does to mountain sheep. The West was once great sheep hunting country. It can again become so.

Meantime bringing down a massive-horned mountain ram on a fair hunt will always remain a feat to test any hunter's prowess. Ask the man that's downed one. He knows. Period. Exclamation point!

TRAIL TO ABILENE

by
JACKSON
COLE

It takes a heap of man to ramrod a cattle drive!

THE dust kicked up by the trail herd was thick and it got into Mark Campbell's nose and mouth and eyes. He swung his horse off to the right of the trail and sat in the saddle watching the oncoming cattle. Mechanically he wiped the dust from his face with a blue bandanna that he took from his pocket. So much dust had settled on his neckerchief that it was useless.

"Everythin' goin' along to suit you, boss?" Joe Pearson asked as he rode up, and Campbell thought he still detected a hint of mockery in the lean, wiry man's voice. "Shore is hot, dry and powdery."

"We're doin' about as well as could be expected," the trail boss said, his hawk-like face expressionless and his voice without warmth. "Yes, just about."

"That's good to know."

Pearson rode on, riding swing at the right of the herd. He edged a wandering longhorn back into line, and what might have been a mocking laugh floated back to Campbell above the rumble of the moving herd.

He scowled, trying to shake off the impression that Pearson was secretly laughing at him. The feeling had dogged him ever since the beginning of the drive back on the Wagonwheel Ranch in Texas. Joe Pearson had gone up the trail lots of times before he joined the Wagonwheel outfit. The natural thing would have been for McSwain to pick Pearson as trail boss on the drive, but the ranch owner had chosen Mark Campbell instead. Campbell was a tophand, but he'd only been up the trail to the railhead in Abilene, Kansas, once in his life.

Pearson had said nothing, but Campbell was sure he had resented Ken McSwain's decision, and the trail boss was certain that resentment lingered. Campbell had been fairly certain of it at the start of the drive four days ago, now he was positive.

UP AHEAD Charlie Blackburn was riding point, the herd trailing after him. Ed Hunter rode swing at the left of the cattle and Orwin Day was back in the deep dust of the drag. Further back along the trail came the chuckwagon with old Tex Small handling the reins of the team. Behind him came the remuda with Young Johnny Doyle in charge of the horses.

There had been no particular trouble on the drive up to now, but Campbell was vaguely uneasy as he jogged alongside the herd. There was wild country up ahead, and there had been talk of rustlers in that region. The trail boss was plagued by the gnawing feeling that something bad was going to happen and happen soon.

Orwin Day peered at Campbell as the trail boss swung in beside the chunky, moonfaced cowboy riding the drag.

"I hope you're as unhappy as I am," Day said. "I eat dust, I breathe dust, and now I'm talkin' it." He shook his head sadly. "Know what?"

"What?" Campbell asked.

"When I was just a little kid my one ambition was to be a cowboy," Day said. "Which goes to prove children ain't got a bit of sense."

"My folks always figgered I would be President," said Campbell with a grin. "Proving grownups haven't much sense either sometimes."

A brindle steer abruptly swung around and started back along the trail, running a little the way *insurrectos* do.

Day raced ahead of the wildy and after a little trouble managed to haze the steer back into the herd. Campbell spotted another steer edging off the trail and got it back in line.

He glanced up at the sun—in about an hour it would be dark and by then it would be best to have the herd bedded down for the night. He was beginning to suspect this drive might prove tough before it was over. Campbell wondered whether he and his crew—six men and a boy—could handle five hundred head of stock and whatever trouble came their way, to boot.

"I've got an idea Joe Pearson doesn't like you much, Mark," Day said as he again rode side by side with the trail boss. "Heard Pearson talkin' to Charlie Blackburn last night. Joe said that anybody can be a trail boss when the goin' is smooth, but it takes a man to handle the job when there's trouble in the wind."

"And I'm not man enough for that I suppose," Campbell said.

"Pearson didn't say so exactly—but that might have been because Charlie Blackburn changed the subject right quick. . . ."

There was water up ahead along the trail and the herd quickened its pace. The drovers had their hands full ramrodding the cattle, but it was a relief to water the beefs at a wide creek and get out of the dust.

It was growing dark by the time the herd was bedded down for the night. Tex Small had the chuckwagon tailgate down and a fire going, as he bustled around setting out the evening chow.

At sixteen, Johnny Doyle was thin and towheaded, but the boy had proved himself a good wrangler. He had the remuda staked out over south of the night camp.

"Company comin'," Orwin Day said, as the men finished washing off the trail dust in the creek and gathered around the fire. "If we had known it Tex could have baked a cake."

The cook snorted. Mark Campbell stared at the riders who approached. Eight men loomed tall and shadowy in the deepening darkness. They were heading south along the trail, apparently returning from Abilene. At a word from their leader they rode off the trail and in toward the fire.

Instinctively the Wagonwheel crew bunched and waited, hands close to their guns. There had been talk of rustlers in this region and it was wise to be wary.

"I'm Bull Larkin," said the big man who appeared to be the leader of the horsemen. "What outfit is this?"

"Wagonwheel out of Texas." Campbell stepped forward. "I'm trail boss. Campbell is the name. Light and rest yore saddles."

He saw that one of the men with Larkin had a bandage around his head, another carried his arm in a sling.

"Thanks." Larkin swung out of the saddle, and the men with him dismounted. "We ran into trouble about five miles north along the trail this morning—"

"Get them horses away from my cookin'" interrupted Tex Small. "Move 'em back."

THE men with Larkin led the eight horses away, leaving them ground-hitched some distance away from the chuckwagon. Campbell noticed that two men remained with the horses. The other five returned to the fire.

"You were saying you ran into trouble along the trail this mornin', Larkin,"

Campbell said. "What happened?"

"Me and my boys were bringing a herd through for the Bar Y outfit," Larkin said. "Trail drivin' is our business. Just as we were bringin' the herd through a canyon, a band of masked hombres attacked us. Tried to fight them off, but we were plumb outnumbered. They wounded two of my men and got away with the Bar Y herd."

"Too bad," Joe Pearson said, as he stood listening with the rest of the Wagonwheel outfit. "You loose much stock?"

"Close to a thousand head," Larkin said.

"That's a lot of cows," Pearson said. "And you came up the trail yesterday?"

"We did," Larkin said firmly.

"Come and get it or I'll throw it away!" shouted the chuckwagon cook. To Tex Small nothing was as important as getting a meal over and done with. "Time to eat."

Campbell invited Larkin and his men to eat with them and they did so, calling in the two men who had remained with the horses.

"We'll be riding soon," Larkin said. "Want to get back to the Bar Y and tell the owner what happened to his herd. He'll be fit to tie."

Pearson said something in a low tone to Charlie Blackburn and Ed Hunter as the meal ended. The two men nodded and casually disappeared in the darkness beyond the light of the fire.

"Get the horses, boys," commanded Larkin. "Let's get goin'."

Two of the men went for the horses. Larkin and the five remaining men stood tensely, close together. Campbell watched them warily, a feeling of uneasiness strong within him. He saw that Joe Pearson stood at his left and Orwin Day was on his right. Johnny Doyle was back near the chuckwagon with Tex Small. The boy's eyes were wide with suppressed excitement, and the old cook casually pulled a shotgun out of the wagon.

"What's the matter?" demanded Larkin sensing the sudden hostility in the attitude of the Wagonwheel cowboys. "What's made you hombres so proddy all of a sudden?"

"If you brought a big herd up the trail yesterday like you said there should have been some sign left," Campbell said coldly. "There isn't any."

Larkin's two men appeared riding their horses and leading the mounts of the other men. Blackburn and Hunter stepped out of the shadows at the right and at the left of the mounted men. Those two members of the Wagonwheel crew now carried rifles in their rope-scarred hands.

"Come on, men," said Larkin disgustedly as he swung into the saddle. "This bunch are shore spooky. They act like we're a bunch of rustlers. Let's go."

"If I was boss of a trail crew who'd lost a thousand head of stock, I'd try right hard to get 'em back before retracing my trail to tell the owner about it," said Campbell.

"Funny thing," said Pearson. "The only Bar Y outfit I've heard of within two hundred miles of here is a sheep ranch. Don't handle any cattle at all."

Bull Larkin cursed under his breath. He swung his horse around and rode away, his men silently following. In a few moments they disappeared into the darkness. Campbell breathed a sigh of relief.

"There's one thing that's worryin' me," Pearson said, and Campbell was sure he again detected the mockery in the man's voice. "For the past half hour there's been nobody guardin' the herd. Don't you figger somebody should be actin' as nighthawk, boss?"

"You're right, Joe," Campbell said. "I shore slipped up on that."

HOARSE shouts and the hollow rattle of gunfire exploded abruptly from the herd that was bedded down some distance away.

"Larkin and his men!" Campbell shouted. "They circled around and got the herd. Come on, we've got to stop them!"

The Wagonwheel crew grabbed up their saddles and ran for the cavvy. In the distance they heard the herd rumble into motion as the rustlers drove the stock away. Mark Campbell cursed himself for a fool. A trail boss with any brains would have left at least two men guarding the herd at all times.

They reached the spot where Johnny Doyle had picketed the remuda. Here they saddled in frantic haste, and in a few minutes everyone save Tex Small was riding, chasing after the herd that was heading up the trail.

It was Campbell who took the lead. The herd was moving fast but the cattle had not stamped yet. He caught a glimpse of a man looming big in the saddle and knew it was Bull Larkin.

The big man heard him coming and twisted around in his kak, gun blazing. The bullet came so close that Campbell felt the wind as it passed his cheek. He fired and his lead took Larkin in the left arm. The rustler uttered a howl of pain. He reined his stallion around and rode like hell out of there.

Two of Larkin's men had seen Campbell cut down on their boss. They wheeled their broncs and started for Campbell, Colts ready. A withering blast from his gun forced them to veer off for a moment —then they speared at Campbell again.

Campbell was suddenly conscious that one of his own men had come up and was riding beside him, though he didn't bother to look at the hombre. Campbell's gun hammer clicked on an empty shell and he realized he had fired every cartridge.

"Get him!" shouted one of Larkin's riders. "Blast him down!"

The outlaws moved in closer, guns aimed at Campbell. Beside him the roar of a six-gun was loud in his ears. He saw one of the rustlers drop his gun and claw at his shoulder. Then the man's feet kicked out of the oxbows and he dropped to the ground.

Again the iron in the sure hand of the puncher beside Campbell roared, as he frantically reloaded his own colt from the cartridges in his gunbelt. The second rustler howled and lost interest in the fight as a bullet got him in the leg.

Up ahead the rest of the Wagonwheel crew were battling the rustlers and making their shots count. Two of Larkin's men beat a hasty retreat, disappearing into brush and trees.

"We got three of them, boss," Joe Pearson said as he rode beside Campbell, and there was amusement in his voice. "Nice work." Campbell realized suddenly that it was Pearson who had ridden beside him and backed his play only seconds before, probably saving his life in the bargain.

With the coming of dawn the herd was still moving up the trail but the Wagonwheel crew was again in charge. Behind them they had left six wounded rustlers. Two of Larkin's men had escaped.

"We'll ride back and see what we can do for those jaspers after we get the herd quieted down," Campbell said. "This job comes first."

The sun came out. The beefs were moving slowly now, for they were tired. Campbell rode swing at the right of the herd and Pearson rode with him. Johnny Doyle had long since headed back for the remuda left in Tex Small's care.

"Look out, Joe!" Campbell shouted as he caught a glimpse of a man hidden behind a rock at the side of the trail. It was Bull Larkin, his left arm in an improvised sling, a Colt in his good right hand.

Campbell's own pistol came down and he triggered just a second before Larkin did. The man's shot went wild, but Campbell's aim was true. He got Larkin.

The herd slowed to a walk and then halted. A little later the chuckwagon came rumbling up and behind it came the kid with the remuda.

TEX SMALL looked pleased with the world.

"You gents shore keep a man busy," said the cook. "I've got six wounded men in the wagon. They'll live to hang."

"You've been doing a nice job as trail boss, Mark," Pearson said. "Like I told Charlie Blackburn the other night, anybody can handle the job when the goin' is smooth, but it takes a man when there's trouble."

"I got the idea that you've been right amused at the way I been handlin' the job," said Campbell.

"Shore," said Pearson with a grin. "A feller can't help chuckling now and then when he sees an hombre he likes making good on a job. I told McSwain to pick you as trail boss when he offered me the job privately before we left the ranch. Figgered I'd rather have somebody else do the worryin' for a change. Sides I'm leavin' when we get back to Texas. Saved enough money to buy my own ranch."

"Gosh," said Orwin Day as he listened, remembering the bit of gossip he passed on to Campbell the day before. "I shore opened my mouth and put my foot into it."

But Mark Campbell was smiling and he felt good. To have a man with Pearson's experience consider you made a good trail boss was enough to make a man feel mighty proud.

A Sandstone Story

by

FRANCIS H. AMES

Mayor Carson scoops up a pie and slaps the gent in the whiskers

Cannon Ball County Fair

Beating those ornery Gumbo jaspers calls for cool and genteel tactics!

AFTER the cowtown of Sandstone won the county seat of Cannon Ball county away from the no-good village of Gumbo Flats it was only natural that they'd want to get together and throw a rip roarin' county fair. Likewise it was in the cards that the Gumbo citizens would rare up and do their worst to win all the prizes in the various contests and events.

However, I don't realize how doggoned serious things is until I hears that Mayor Silver Carson of Sandstone has called a special meetin' to figger out how to fox these Gumbo hairpins.

When I arrives the town hall is jammed to the rafters, and all our most important and exasperatin' citizens is present. I see such hair raisin' gents as Knothole and Highpockets Dobbs, Shorty Downs, Curly Ransome, Hank Willard, Slim Blaine, and such. Right off I knows that things is plumb serious; I really open up my ears then. Mayor Silver Carson is getting ready to spout off, his shinin'

white hair and beard standin' out like the tail o' a spooked polecat.

"It has come to my official ears," he bellers, "that them Gumbo Flat rannies has been spreadin' word around the range that we is a bunch o' ignorant roughnecks —we ain't got no manners nor upraisin' a'tall. They claims that the comin' Cannon Ball County Fair, under the management o' the town of Sandstone, will wind up in a free wheelin', hair pullin', howlin' massacre.

"Sech statements wan't so bad when we wuz merely the town o' Sandstone—as the dignified county seat o' Cannon Ball we simple can't stand fer it. Before I hears this here outrageous scandal I figgers that all we has to do to uphold the honor o' Sandstone is to beat these jaspers in the various events. "Now," he sez, real sonorous, "I knows that we not only has to beat 'em thisaway, but we has to beat 'em thataway."

"What in time do you mean, thataway, Mayor?" inquires Curly Ransome, who is one o' the smartest citizens we has. The feller kin read almost any sort o' printin' without battin' an eye.

"Harrumph," says Mayor Carson, clearin' his throat. "By thataway I means any which way that we kin figger out, o' course. Provided it's genteel, you understand—real dignified."

"Genteel?" says Highpockets Dobbs. "I never tried that there method. I allus thought a hefty smack in the snoot was the best way to handle them Gumbo—"

"Shut up," roars Mayor Carson. "You ignorant rannies ain't got sense enough to pour sand out'n a boot—besides most o' you is drunk right now."

"I'm a'tellin' you," he roars, shakin' a fat finger at us, "there ain't goin' to be no boozin' nor fightin' at this here County Fair. We is goin' to knuckle down and beat these Gumbo Flatter's in the horse race, the cookin' contest, and in as many events as we kin, by hook or crook—real genteel like."

"No boozin' or fightin'," howls Shorty Downs. "Why Mayor, iff'n we ain't primed to the gills and rarin' to hoot an' howl, them Gumbo rattlers will shore trompl us into the sod, plump to the ears."

"It's simple," says Mayor Carson. "All we does is lay our plans right careful, here and now, then get up the mornin' of the fair, without drinkin' more'n a gallon apiece the night before, and guzzle down nothin' but water, or lemonade all day. Feller kin endure such fer one day —special fer the honor and dignity o' Sandstone."

"Water!" groans High Dobbs. "Lemonade!"

"Sure," says Slim Blaine. "They allus has pink lemonade at county fairs—feller from back east tells me that."

"Yeah," chimes in Hank Willard, "and a gent kin really put up a scrap without no firewater in his gullet. Knothole Dobbs tells me that he was drier'n a prairie dog when he wipes up the Widder Malone's place with them two outlaw jaspers last year. Ain't that right Knothole?"

KNOTHOLE DOBBS looks around with them pale, washed out peepers o' his'n. He is a long legged jasper, with a half bald, pointed dome. He is the homliest gent in seven states, but the most illustrious citizen we has. He is the very feller what rides the gallopin' hayrake, captures two owlhoots and marries off the Widder Malone—all in less'n twenty-four hours. He is also the gent what drives the gasoline buggy in the race fer the county seat. Folks listen real careful when Knothole opens his trap.

"Yes," he says, final, "the Mayor is plumb right. It'll be a terrible sacrifice, but we has gotta stay absolute sober the day o' the fair and beat them Gumbo citizens in the contests and events without beatin' their fool heads off to boot."

"Bravo, Knothole," roars Mayor Carson. "I knowed I could depend on you to back me up.

"Now," he goes on, "that we has decided to be miserable on County Fair Day, and give up all the fun, let's decide what chance we has to win out in the events. Ma Higgins tells me that she has reared up some of the finest garden truck that was ever seed. She says them vegetables is out'n this world. Hank Willard's bull, Madame Butterfly, is certain to walk off with top honors in the bull contest, and they ain't no competition whatever fer Knothole Dobbs' hogs. However, we don't arrive no place onless we wins the hoss race and the cake bakin' contest.

"Far as I know," he groans, "they ain't

a broomtail in the county what kin keep that black 'Smoke' hoss of Walt Riggs in sight, or a female what can bake up a cake like Mrs. Flint Tuttle o' Gumbo. These is the two top events—I don't see how in time we kin figger to win 'em."

We simple can't lose that race, drunk or sober, we all know. We'd never hear the last o' that, for shore.

Knothole Dobbs rises to his pins then.

"Folks," he says, "I has a bronc what kin run a heap faster'n it appears from lookin' at the critter. I ain't never told you about him afore, simple because I never knowed the spooky back bitin' critter kin run ontil I tries to ketch him last week."

He pauses to look all around with them pale, washed out eyes of his'n—you kin see he don't figger we'll believe him.

"You know that long-legged, slab-sided, hammer-headed Spooks hoss the feller trades me when I is lubricated up at Miles City and can't noways defend myself? Well, that animal kin run like blue lightnin'."

"Yeah," drawls Highpockets Dobbs, glarin' at Mayor Carson, "and you gents all know that good-lookin' heifer, Sally Knolls, that I runs around with. Well, she kin thump up a heap better cake than any female in Cannon Ball county."

"Gosh," snorts Hank Willard, "that fiddle-footed blue roan o' yours, Knothole, don't appear to be fast enough to get out'n its own way. Still, it leaps sideways ten, twenty feet, real limber, when it spooks off from such articles as tumbleweeds."

"That hoss," says Knothole, real solemn, "may not be as fast as Walt Riggs' 'Smoke', but it is our only hope."

You could have heard a pin drop in that hall when we all realizes what we is up agin'. Them Gumbo Flats citizens will plumb go into hysterics laughin' at us if they wins the hoss race and proves their women folks kin bake up the best cake.

Mayor Silver Carson groans.

"I has seen this bronc o' Knothole's," he says, real sad, "and it is a weak link on which to hang the pride and honor o' Sandstone. Still, with Knothole in the saddle maybe we has a chance. All you fellers do yore durndest to win out with yore garden truck and live stock. Seein' that Highpockets Dobbs figgers his gal kin win the cake contest I hereby appoints him to watch the cake judgin' and see that the females get a square deal. We ain't got much chance here, cause the Gumbo Mayor is the judge.

"Before closin'," he winds up, "I warns you gents to stay sober—act genteel and polite—no fightin' iff'n it kills you."

We all goes out with our faces a mile long. It shore is goin' to be a dull day at the fair. Still, I goes home and soaks up my mitts in salt brine—things look awful explosive to me.

FOLKS gets a heap excited right off and begins to make some high-powered bets concernin' who kin bake up the best grub, raise the finest garden truck, and fetch in the best livestock. We sings real loud about this here hoss race, but we bets awful low. The men, specially gents like Highpockets Dobbs, Rant Wilks and Dirk Kent o' Gumbo Flats, who has gals entered in the cookin' contest, is ready to back up their females to the limit—with gunfire if necessary.

Bein' a mite cracked in the noggin, and mostly escaped lunatics, these Gumbo Flat hairpins can't carry on no argyments in a dignified manner like Mayor Carson tells us—they has to wave their arms and beller ontil they is blue in the face. It seems that the citizens o' Sandstone don't like this here insulting, arm wavin' deal a'tall. They takes stern measures, so to speak, to put a stop to sech foolishment.

"The most genteel way to handle such hairpins," orates Shorty Downs, "is to kick the feller a fling in the shins—this usual irons the bumps out'n him in no time."

"Won't work," drawls Highpockets Dobbs, who is Knothole's long-legged brother, "I done that to Rant Wilks when he was standin' there bellerin' about Walt Riggs' hoss—he jest leaps around on one pin, spoutin' off louder'n ever."

"You see," says Curly Ransome, "it don't pay to be nice and genteel with them Gumbo rattlers."

"Didn't work with the gent I encounters, either," pipes up Pa Higgins. "The feller wouldn't pipe down ontil I draws down on him with a buffalo gun."

"Did you ventilate the critter, Pa?" I inquires.

"Dunno," says Pa, "he was so fur away

the last four five shots that I didn't take time to go over and see. It sorta looked like he leaped twenty feet high and exploded as he passed over the ridge. He wan't no account noways."

Me and Highpockets Dobbs arrives at the scene o' festivities a mite late, when the big day final comes around. This is because we is fools enough to help Knothole load up that sow of his'n. This particular female pig allus was a mite peculiar, but ever since she got rolled lickety snort in a hay rake she is downright suspicious o' all and sundry.

Seems like she figgers that any livin' thing what crosses her path is tryin' to stop her from goin' some place or other. The results o' this obstinate attitude is that she goes there with the unstoppable velocity of a two ton bowlin' ball. Appears to me she is a mite worse now that she has thirteen little piglets—them three months old critters follers right along in mama's footsteps in no uncertain manner.

I learns right quick in this hog-loadin' deal not to get up once I'm knocked down. It's a heap better, and a feller suffers less internal damage, to be flipped in the air once and trompled over fourteen times, than to be turned over fourteen times complete.

Time me and High gets Knothole and the former widder Malone, who is now Mrs. Knothole Dobbs, on their way to the fair grounds, we ain't in no fit shape to go nowheres. I'm a'tellin' you that we is in plumb awful shape. What clothes ain't tore off us complete, has hoof prints all over 'em—goin' in both directions.

Time we gets our clothes changed and heads fer the fair grounds our gizzards is still twitchin'. I wants to down a couple snorts o'fire water but High says we can't do her. He says that we is goin' to stay plumb sober, jest like Mayor Silver Carson tells us to.

The fair grounds is squirmin' like a prairie ant hill when we arrives and ties up our broncs. The whole flat is covered with mounts and rigs of all kinds; the citizens has turned out enmasse, so to speak. There is a big banner wavin' in front of the long, low show buildin' that announces that this here is the Cannon Ball County Fair, and no foolin'.

Lookin' the place over I decides that said county has done her up real prime. There is a circular race track marked off with stakes driv in the ground, and the buildin' has stalls fer livestock and tables fer pies, cakes, and garden truck. This here structure is right beside the race track.

"Fine," declares Highpockets, lookin' the place over. "I hears that the duly appointed committees from Sandstone and Gumbo gets so durn excited when they arranges this deal that they gets everything sorta mixed up. There is simple goin' to be so many events takin' place to once that a feller can't watch 'em all.

"The way things is," he orates, "I kin keep a sharp eye on the cookin' contest table while I watches Knothole charge around in that there race—smack out the window."

AS WE sashays up to the door we runs into Curly Ransome. It only takes one look at this gent to tell us he is stewed to the gills. Highpockets Dobbs grabs him by the shirt front, liftin' his boots clear off the ground.

"What do you mean?" he roars, "by gettin' under the influence o' liquor?"

"Honest," gurgles Curly, gettin' red in the face, "I ain't downed nothin' but that there pink lemonade, like the mayor says."

"Pink lemonade!" bellows High. "How come yore eyes is crossed then? A feller can't even tell which way yore lookin!"

He drops Curly and rares over to the lemonade booth, which is bein' run by a innocent appearin' lady from Gumbo.

"Looks like dirty work at the crossroads," High declares. "We'll just sample six 'er eight glasses o' this to make shore."

We does. I'm a'tellin' you folks that I has washed my tonsils with some powerful mixtures in my time, but none o' them kin hold a candle to this here material. It tastes sorta peculiar, but it simple raises a feller's hair until his sombrero topples plumb off.

We finds out later that them Gumbo rannies has been dumpin' assorted fire water into the stuff on the sly. I never did find out if the Gumbo lady was in on the deal—feller can't trust no Gumbo Flat citizen, male or female. Me and High enters that show buildin' feelin' like we has been kicked between the eyes with a mule.

There is a long table covered with prize cookin' and garden truck on one side; on t'other is the stalls with the livestock. In lookin' the crowd over it appears to me that they is a mite more loud talkin' than usual. The female's mouths is goin' like windmills, and the gents is wavin' their arms real animated. I spots such salty hairpins as Rant Wilks and Dirk Kent o' Gumbo, hangin' close to the cookin' table with their gals. Mayor Carson is climbin' up on the table to make a speech; I notice that his long, silver mustache is stained pink with that there powerful lemonade. The kingpin o' Sandstone is primed plumb to the gills!

About this time Madame Butterfly, Hank Willard's imported bull, lets loose with a terrific beller which bursts open a couple watermelons. I flinch like a gent has banged me on the head with a scoop shovel. The situation looks plumb explosive to me.

Jest then Mayor Carson starts to spout off in his usual dignified style.

"Feller citizens, ladies and gents o' Cannon Ball County," orates the mayor. "Altho we has had some slight argyments in the past, which has resulted in hard feelin's from time to time, and, in a few cases, broke arms, we is no longer separated into just the towns o' Sandstone and Gumbo Flats. We is now united into the county o' Cannon Ball. As such we is gathered here, in fair and square competition to judge the merits o' the county's stock, cookin', and produce."

He pauses to glare around like a wounded walrus.

"Each of us," he bellers, real sonorous, "has kindly feelin's fer his neighbor—in spite o' the plumb loud smell o' the ornery folks what comes over from Gumbo."

He draws a big breath, hiccoughs in his whiskers, and goes on.

"We will now draw around the cookin' contest table while the miserable judge announces the winners."

As he quits spoutin' I sudden realizes jest how balled up this here county fair is. Here the mayor o' Sandstone is leadin' the cookin' contest off while across the aisle they is lookin' over and judgin' the livestock. Outside I kin hear folks hollerin' and hootin' as they lines up fer the hoss race. A gent simple can't watch all these here things to once. I runs and sticks my head out the winder while Highpockets runs back and forth between the winder and the cookin' table.

When I rams my gullet over the edge of that winder sill I kin almost touch Knothole Dobbs, who is mounted on that sway-bocked, long-geared, clumsy-footed hoss of his. Right next to Dobbs is Walt Riggs on his Smoke hoss. This Riggs hairpin is a big black-haired, ugly-lookin' jasper from down Powder river way what thinks that he is the kingpin o' the country. His head is swelled up worse'n a poisoned pup—Sandstone citizens don't take to the waddie noways. He is handin' out some plumb insultin' language to Knothole. Feller should know better'n that.

"I has final got you where I wants you, Knothole," he chortles. "I'm gonna run that club-footed animal o' you'rn smack into the sod."

"Is that so?" says Knothole, softlike. "They is a prime saddle fer first prize in this race but I kin use another one. How about a side bet o' our hulls?"

Riggs looks from his silver-mounted monstrosity to Knothole's well-worn Sentinel Butte.

"I'll just take you up on that," he sneers, "even if yore hull ain't fit fer a gent to ride in."

THEY is about twenty hosses in the race and I'm considerable worried for Knothole Dobbs. This bone-headed blue roan of his'n ain't half broke and this is a circular track. How in time a feller is goin' to steer that spooky animal four times around the track is more'n I kin figger out.

Folks is hootin' and howlin' fer all getout with the broncs churnin' up dust and pawin' the sod. Knothole sets there in his leather with his Stetson pulled clear down on his pointed dome and his bony chin stuck out like a rock. Then he spots me and gives me one o' them famous Knothole grins.

"I'll take 'em like Grant took Richmond," he hollers, jest as they fires the startin' gun."

The cowponies bound off like they is greyhounds, layin' down ontil their bellies durn near touches the sod. The dust rises up somethin' awful and the roar and thunder o' hoofs shakes the buildin'.

Knothole gets off to a good start with

the crowd howlin' like blood-thirsty Comanches. Highpockets Dobbs durn near saws off my windpipe as he leans out to wave Knothole on and then dashes back to the cookin' table.

"Mayor Flint Tuttle, o' Gumbo," he roars, "is the judge over there—I gotta watch that rattler.

The big hairpin near beats me to death rushin' back and forth from that pie table to the winder all the time that there race is in progress.

Them broncs goes by the first round all strung out. Walt Riggs is in the lead with Knothole's blue roan tailin' him, and rump to shoulder of a big bay from Gumbo. This onbelievable bronc o' Knothole's runs like a elephant with the heaves, but the critter shore does cover the ground. Them big hooves make the ground tremble as they pass my window. As they goes around the turn I see the Gumbo bay fall back. After that all them other broncs might jest as well stayed home—this here race is all Smoke and Spooks.

Knothole is rakin' that animal from stem to stern ever' jump, leanin' over the bulge ontil his chin sticks out between the bronc's ears. That Smoke pony ain't no slouch either. That animal is pickin' 'em up and layin' 'em down to beat the cards. As they flashes by the second round them two broomtails is neck and neck and I durn near yells myself blue in the face. Folks leaps out'n the grandstand and runs all over the place, howlin' their heads off. You simple can't make these kind of folks stay put.

All this time I'm watchin' the race this here pie and cake judgin' contest is gettin goin' somethin' awful. Slim Blaine, whose wife has a cake in the deal, tells me all about it later. It seems that when High Dobbs finds out that Mayor Flint Tuttle o' Gumbo is the judge he don't trust him nohow. He is dead sartain that this crooked rannie is goin' to give the prizes to his wife's cake, and to Sarah Smithers, who is Rant Wilk's gal. Highpockets is dead set on havin' his gal, Sally Knowles, win the deal. I could never prove it, o' course, but I figgers that them women folks had been inhalin' this here pink lemonade without bein' aware o' its potency.

The Gumbo king-pin shoves a pink and white cake and a pink and blue cake forward and clears his throat.

"I has decided," he says, "That—"

Jest then High, who figgers he knows who them cakes belong to, rushes back from yellin' his head off at the winder, and walks up real dignified, shovin' his long beak across the table into Tuttle's whiskers.

"And who," he asks, real sarcastic, mixes up these two horrible sourdoughs?"

Tuttle gets red in the face and tries to back off, but Sally Knolls and Mrs. Knothole Dobbs pipes right up.

"Them cakes," they says, "belongs to Mrs. Flint Tuttle and Sarah Smithers."

"Aha," snorts High, as he places one hand on top o' each of them cakes and leans forward, "this is a plumb crooked deal."

As he does this his big mitts sinks clean to the bottom o' them thick frosted delicacies.

"Whatdoyu mean," roars the mayor. "You rough neck—"

"Shut up," bellers High. "Iff'n I wasn't a plumb polite Sandstone gent I'd smack you in the snout! As it is I warshes my hands o' the crooked deal."

WITH this genteel remark he hauls them big mitts o' his'n out'n those cakes and snaps a couple pound o' frostin' off 'em, real dignified like. This sweet material splatters across the mayor o' Gumbo's vest like cannon balls from a Gatlin' gun. High snorts in disgust as he turns to walk off.

"Ruin my cake will you?" yodles Mrs. Flint Tuttle, grabbin' up a squash pie and flingin' it with the speed o' a bullet. This mushy article catches High square behind the ears.

Mayor Silver Carson sees that things is beginnin' to get a mite undignified so he leaps upon the table and hollers for peace and quiet.

"Ladies and gents," he bellers, weavin' in his tracks, "this is a disgrace to Cannon Ball county—please be calm!"

"To heck with Cannon Ball county!" yelps a reckless Gumbo Flat hairpin, hurlin' a two pound termater. The red vegetable ketches the peace-makin' Sandstone official in the walrus whiskers and upsets him complete. Slim Blaine tells me that it is amazin' how many cakes and pies that feller flattens when he lights.

However, the portly mayor o' Sandstone ain't a gent to get careless with, even when he is tryin' to be polite. He bounds off that table like a catamount, scoops up a pie and catapults to the floor like a chargin' buffalo.

"At 'em boys!" he bellers, and he slaps the termater throwin' gent in the whiskers so durn hard that the pie tin bends in a half circle around his ears.

I don't know nothin' about all this goin' on behind my back then cause I has my eyes glued on this here excitin' race. I durn near swallers my Climax when I sees a Gumbo hairpin sidle out and ram a four-foot tumbleweed down on one o' those race track markin' stakes.

I knows right off what'll happen when that Spooks hoss comes up beside that there thing. Tumbleweeds is about the same to this spooky bronc as pink elephants to a feller what has been on a four day toot. I hollers bloody murder, tryin' to warn Knothole, but it ain't no use.

He comes larrupin' down the track a full nose ahead o' Walt Riggs' hoss. He is on the inside track now, takin' the shortest route, standin' up in his stirrups, and leanin' over ontil he is plumb ahead o' the bronc's nose. I don't think that Knothole Dobbs ever wanted anything so bad as to win that race fer Sandstone.

I never did see no critter do a side flip like that afore. One minute he is stretched out two inches from the ground, the next he bounds sideways clear across the track. Knothole is settin' so high that he durn near got dumped. I'm ready to stand here flat footed and declare that another bronc twister never lived what 'ud stayed with that sudden side jump—but good old Knothole Dobbs shore does. I hangs out the winder prayin' ontil I sounds like a sure enough preacher. While I is engaged in this reverent work some gent heaves a watermelon on the back o' my neck.

I has never been able to find out who tosses this liquid vegetable. High Dobbs tells me that he ducks one about then, that is flung by the mayor o' Gumbo. He says that it is travelin' like a forty-five slug when it passes by. Anyways, I collects this watery warsh tub on the back o' my neck—it submerges me complete.

That's why I miss seein' Knothole Dobbs make his famous ride through the fair building, settin' up there in his hull, hollerin' like a Comanche; ridin' that Spook hoss like Sir Galahad.

Folks tells me that when his bronc spooked sideways it leaped clear across the race track and right smack in front of the building's door. Knothole simple drives home with the iron and goes right through. That big-footed hoss of his clears them stock pens in half a dozen jumps, knockin' half the flimsy things down. He passes through that buildin' so fast that by the time I has pried the watermelon seeds out'n my ears and cleared my peepers, there he is, big as life and twice as handsome, bearin' down on Walt Riggs, and only three four jumps behind.

I shore hates to take my eye off that race, but when a gent socks me with a watermelon from the rear, I wants to see the color of said feller's hair. I turns around, ready to charge. Then I sees what is goin' on behind my back.

THIS cookin' contest has turned into a howlin' free-fer-all. The Sandstone fellers has plumb forgot about bein' polite and genteel, includin' Mayor Silver Carson. Our dignified official has the mayor o' Gumbo down, massagin' his features with a blue and pink cake. The Gumbo kingpin is squirmin' like a night crawler, while his wife is beatin' Carson over the noggin with a long-necked squash.

Slim Blaine is defendin' hisself with a four pound turnip. I spots Hank Willard's smilin' face just as he disappears behind a whizzin' pie. Them Sandstone citizens is takin' the beatin' o' their lives, bein' outnumbered two to one.

The Sandstone womenfolks seem to be doin' right well, however, with Ma Higgins flingin' vegetables right and left and Mrs. Knothole backin' her up in grand style. I grabs up a quarter filled sack o' prize spuds and prepares to enter the fracas—then I spots that there sow of Knothole's.

This stubborn critter is jest emergin' from her broke-down pen. She stands there, rollin' her little eyes, with her tail curled straight up over her fat back. She is a mite suspicious concernin' where all these folks is tryin' to head her off from goin'. Them little pigs o' her'n gathers around—waitin' fer orders. This hog sudden lets out a shriek like a dyin' coyote and charges.

Them battlin' folks don't hardly know what happens to 'em. They feels like they has been flung in the air by a steam locomotive, follered by thirteen flat cars loaded with hump-backed camels. Sometimes these here follerin' squealers goes over a gent and sometimes they goes under—the hair raisin' results is the same in both cases. Said feller rises to his pins—iff'n he is still able—shuffled complete. I sees Dirk Kent turn over three times, balancin' a pie in one hand and a ripe termater in t'other.

These critters goes round and round, plumb continuous. I backs up against the winder and engages a Gumbo hairpin what has a long, ignorant face, and is threatenin' to side swipe me with a board. I heaves back with my tater sack—time that blow unwinds this surprised feller has been upset, carried six feet on the back o' that sow, and half trompled to death. The howlin' and shriekin' them critters lets out as they passes confuses a feller. I has just engaged a rannie what is wieldin' a split open watermelon when Knothole passes through again in full leap.

He don't make her through so pretty this time, folks tells me, cause he collides with this here Madame Butterfly bull, jest as that there red-eyed elephant is issuin' from its broke-down pen. Knothole don't waste no time whatever. He swings up a free boot and drives his long-shanked spur rowel into the critter's fat back.

As Madame Butterfly leaps away from this back-gougin' foul blow, the blue roan hauls off and whales him in the ribs with both heels, and takes a nip out'n his ear. Dobbs passes on triumphant with the ory-eyed Durham in full pursuit, bellerin' bloody murder.

I leaps through the door after him to see how fur behind he is in the race. Them hosses is now goin' 'round and 'round in a cloud o' dust with this here angry bull one jump behind Spooks, with its fool horns lowered in full charge. Knothole is four jumps behind Walt Riggs—'pears to me like he is gainin' with ever' leap.

Just as I gets set to cheer Knothole on, this whole passel of fightin' ladies and gents passes over my carcass, follered by them hogs. Some hairpin knocks me down and steps on one ear, tearin' said article loose from my noggin. When I rises to hands and knees I gathers a swift boot in the rear what lowers me to the sod agin.

Time I gets up complete, Knothole is comin' down the home stretch with folks howlin' and hootin' like crazy. I dashes across that race track in nothin' flat and flings myself down on that there tumble weed—smashin' it flat. A side leap now shore would be fatal.

Them Gumbo citizens is still bellerin' their fool heads off about the finish o' that race. Me, I say it was fair, but they say it ain't. Seems like Walt Riggs is one jump ahead and three jumps from the finish line when Madame Butterfly final ketches up with that Spooks bronc what kicks him in the ribs. He rams them powerful horns o' his'n under the rear of that big-footed roan and heaves him plumb over the finish line, six inches the winner.

YOU COULD have heard folks yell fer twenty mile. Knothole stands his bronc on its hind legs while he piles off and bulldogs that Durham bull flatter'n a flounder. Madame Butterfly has experienced the deadly and efficient work o' Sandstone's champeen bull-dogger afore—he don't want no more of it. He leaps to his feet and whisks off among the teams and rigs on the flat.

Them hogs is already under-circlin' them teams and rigs. Madame Butterfly don't do so much damage—merely overheaves a few surreys and baffles folks with them terrific bellers and snorts. But them hogs is a different article.

There is one thing no bronc kin stand, and that is to have a continuous stream o' shriekin' animals pass under his belly. When the sow passes under, them broom tails jest rare up and paw the breeze, but when the little piglets foller through they goes into free-wheelin' hysterics.

It is then that I notice that one o' these little pigs is missin'. I finds out later that this porkie gets delayed when it runs up inside Mayor Flint Tuttle's undershirt. It seems that the portly kingpin o' Gumbo gets pinwheeled into the air by the sow, and the follerin' herd shuffles him so complete that the last pig in line flips inside his tore-up clothes. The mayor has on a tight fittin' celluloid collar, and the porker can't get out the top noways. Said critter ain't never been trained to go no way but

forward, so he keeps makin' heroic efforts to foller on through.

"That durn hog," declares the mayor later, "dang near strangles me to death." Trouble is, he has his snout out under my chin. He near cracks my ear drums with that gosh-awful yodelin'. I tries to get him to back up in the britchin', but it simple ain't no use. He durn near wore me out pawin' and heavin' before my collar button final pops off."

Cattle-raisin' folks really move out when their rigs gets loose. In one second flat them lemonade guzzlin' rannies drops everything and takes after their rigs. It's really a prime sight to see twenty or thirty rigs millin' around—under-circulated by them pigs. I hears some of the most brilliant, all-fired language on that flat that was ever put out.

T'ain't but a few minutes ontil the Cannon Ball county fair grounds is durn nigh deserted, except fer a few folks what is half-paralyzed with that there powerful lemonade or laid up more or less permanent. Folks tumble into surreys and wagons ever' which way. The last I seen o' them hogs they is streakin' across the prairie in a cloud o' dust, with the cute little feller what Mayor Tuttle abuses, a couple hundred yards to the rear.

Pa Higgins says he ain't never goin' to attend no more o' Sandstone's blowouts. He says that they allus seem to wind up in some sort o' confusion that ain't good fer the nerves o' man or beast. It seems that Pa leaves town at full gallop with Mrs. Flint Tuttle instead o' his own woman. Madame Butterfly is lumberin' along behind, upheavin' the back end o' his surrey. Pa tells me later that he don't find out he has the wrong female ontil he gets clean to the ranch.

"My eyes is so crossed," he says, "with that there pink lemonade mixture that I gets the queer idee I has somehow gathered up Knothole's sow. The durn heifer leans on me all the way home, droolin' cake frostin' in my whiskers."

Ma Higgins is shore suspicious ontil Pa comes back and dumps off Mrs. Tuttle and picks her up. Mrs. Tuttle is shore mad.

While she is gone the kingpin o' Gumbo soaks up some more o' that lemonade to settle his stomach, so to speak, after he has it churned up by that little pig. Seems like there is just one cake left what is settin' all alone and unsmashed on thet there long table. The mayor o' Gumbo grabs this up and waves her in the air while he makes a long and sonorous speech. The only gent present to listen to this ondignified harangue is Curly Ransome, who is just comin' to, under the table.

Curly swears that the mayor awards first prize to that there cake afore he sets it down real gentle on the table and collapses complete. Curly says he can't noways understand the Mayor cause he is spoutin' off about a pink and blue cake while the article he is waivin' in the air is a out-an-out chocolate arrangement, cooked up by Sally Knolls.

As I says afore, this Curly Ransome is one o' the smartest citizens we has. He simple eases them first and second prize blue ribbons out'n Mayor Tuttle's mitt, while he is layin' on the floor snorin' like a slide trombone, and drapes 'em over Sally Knoll's cake.

The Cannon Ball county fair don't turn out so bad after all. We is plumb pleased. However, them Gumbo Flats citizens is madder'n locoed bobcats.

NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS

THE RIDER OF THE RUBY HILLS, a novel by JIM MAYO

FIDDLEFOOT'S RETURN, a Sandstone story by FRANCIS H. AMES

AN AMBUSH FOR ZORRO, a Don Diego Vega story by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

PRONGHORNS ARE BACK, a gun and game feature by JOHN A. THOMPSON

by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

The Z in "tortilla" sends Don Diego Vega on a fighting errand

Zorro drove his adversary back

ZORRO'S HOT TORTILLAS

FRAY FELIPE, the elderly Franciscan padre in charge of the chapel on the plaza at Reina de Los Angeles, had sent that morning for young Don Diego Vega for a consultation relating to the fund for the poor.

The consultation had fatigued Diego considerably, to judge from his manner, which was that of a man yearning for bed and a session of undisturbed sleep. So, as he started home along the side of the plaza, he decided he needed refreshment. He turned through the door of the tavern and into its cool semi-dark depths.

"Ah, Don Diego!" the fat innkeeper shouted in welcome. He came from behind his counter and tried to bend double in a bow despite the ample paunch which did not suit such a courtesy. "My poor pigsty of a tavern is honored by your presence."

"It is, indeed," Diego agreed. He stifled a yawn with a lace-embroidered handkerchief held in fingers which bore jeweled rings. "I have need of refreshment."

"At your service, Don Diego! In addition to a goblet of my very best wine, may I make a suggestion?"

"Make it," Diego permitted, as he sank wearily upon a bench beside a table against the wall, away from the others in the big common room of the inn.

"I have a new cook, Don Diego, who came to me well recommended. His name is Pedro Gomez—"

"There are thousands of persons named Gomez, and at least a quarter of them are also called Pedro," Diego interrupted. "Is there aught else to recommend him?"

"This man—ah, what a cook he is! And he has a specialty which I feel sure will appeal to your taste."

"And that is—?"

"He takes a tortilla sizzling hot, fresh from the stove, and smears it with a thickness of the crystalized honey you like so well. On top of that he puts a second hot tortilla smeared with a fruit paste of his own making. Atop that comes a third hot tortilla, also covered with a thickness of crystallized honey, and then—"

"Fetch it for me before your stack of tortillas reaches the ceiling," Diego broke in. "And your best wine—which is poor enough stuff, no doubt."

The landlord bowed and hurried out into the patio to proceed to the kitchen to superintend this order personally. Diego yawned and looked around the room.

AT A TABLE near the fireplace lounged a tall, slender man who was a stranger to Diego. His clothes were fine and rings were upon his fingers, and there was something of the sophisticate in his appearance and manner. He wore no blade. He did not look like a prosperous trader; and Diego decided he was a gambler who traveled up and down the highways of Alta California and preyed on the unwary.

The others in the low-ceilinged room were townsmen, travelers off El Camino Real, and a couple of traders loud in their talk regarding the prices of tallow and hides. A single trooper from the local *presidio* sat at a table half intoxicated.

In from the plaza strutted Sergeant Manuel Garcia, second in command at Reina de Los Angeles, an obese and uncouth man whom Diego had cultivated for excellent reason. Garcia blew out the ends of his enormous black mustache and stopped beside the table.

"Don Diego! *Amigo!*" Garcia saluted. " 'Tis a better day since I have seen you."

Diego gestured toward a bench. "Seat yourself, sergeant, and have wine with me," he invited. "I await some special concoction being made by a new cook the landlord tells me he has engaged."

"The rogue's name is Pedro Gomez," the sergeant replied. "I admit that he can cook, but in other matters I would not trust him two feet from his stove. There is the look of a scoundrel about him."

"I have noticed several strangers around the pueblo recently," Diego said. "There—at that table—"

"He is a gentleman who arrived yesterday. He reported at the *presidio* according to regulations, and his name is Esteban Audelo, so he says. He is from Monterey and is looking for investments for himself and certain associates here in the Southland."

"Investments of what nature?"

"That, *amigo*, is a thing I do not know," the burly sergeant admitted.

The landlord came back to the table and served the wine, and Garcia saluted and drank, while Diego fingered the stem of his goblet. And presently the landlord returned again with a flat silver dish, upon which was the stack of tortillas Diego had ordered, oozing honey and jelly, the whole mess steaming hot.

"Please notify me as to how you relish it," the landlord requested; and waddled away toward his counter.

Diego took a sip of wine and glanced down at the plate. His eyes narrowed slightly, but otherwise he betrayed nothing. Yet before him was a thing rather startling. Baked into the top of the uppermost tortilla, having been scratched in the dough before baking, was a ragged letter "Z."

Sergeant Garcia happened to look down and see it at the same time. "What is this?" he asked, his voice hoarse and charged with sudden interest. "The letter Z. Why, that is—"

"'Tis what people call the mark of Zorro, is it not?"

"It is so," Garcia admitted. "And made on top of a tortilla by the new cook in the kitchen. So! The thing is plain to a man of my broad undertsanding, *amigo*. Perhaps here is one end of the trail."

"The trail?"

"At the other end of which will be this Zorro's capture! The scoundrel of a new cook—a man I did not like at first sight—is leaving the mark of Zorro on his cookery, is he? And why? To attract the attention of Zorro, no less, and have Zorro communicate with him. A pretty plot! Zorro must be again in the vicinty of Reina de Los Angeles. This Pedro Gomez no doubt is a friend of Zorro's and desires to furnish him with information!"

DIEGO gulped some wine hastily, bending his head forward to hide the sudden gleam in his eyes. He knew quite well that Pedro Gomez, the cook, was not an intimate of Zorro . . . for Don Diego Vega himself was Zorro, and only three other men knew that—his father, old Fray Felipe, and Bernardo, his mute peon body-servant.

"What are you about to do?" Diego asked the sergeant as the latter finished his goblet of wine quickly.

"I am about to earn the rich reward offered by His Excellency the Governor for Zorro's capture or slaying," Garcia replied. "No doubt it will mean promotion for me, also. Perhaps you will soon see me wearing the epaulets of an ensign, *amigo*, and strutting around the pueblo wearing an officer's blade with gleaming jewels in the hilt—"

"You have not caught Zorro yet," Diego observed.

"I start on that employment immediately, Don Diego. Ha! 'Tis a hot and smoking trail, let us say."

"What do you intend? I dislike turbulence."

"I regret to annoy you, Don Diego, but of turbulence there must be, of necessity, plenty immediately," Sergeant Garcia replied, struggling to his feet. "I'll invade the kitchen and grab this scoundrel by his ears and slam him back against the wall and compel him to cofess. I'll shake him as a terrier does a rat! Ha! I'll drag him by his long hair across the stones of the patio floor—"

Diego raised a hand in a languid command for silence. "One moment, Garcia," he begged, his voice low. "Already, persons in the room are watching you. No doubt they think you are quarreling with me. The newcomer you named Esteban Audelo is looking our way. And I have a suggestion to make you."

"I am all attention, Don Diego."

"Let us assume that you rush into the kitchen and accuse this fellow. And then, if he really is an intimate of Zorro, he will know you are on his trail, and will deny everything and afterward be on guard. Would it not be better simply to watch him and see if he contacts any man, and if so whom, and then ascertain whether the person he contacts can be Zorro?"

Sergeant Garcia drew himself up and blew out his mustache. "You, Don Diego, my friend, are an exalted personage," he said. "You do not understand common scoundrels. The best way to handle such is to be abrupt and exert violence. Forgive my absence for a moment—duty calls."

The sergeant hitched up his sword belt, drew out his pistol, and charged like a bull in the fighting ring across the room and through the patio door. The landlord lumbered after him, the others in the room betrayed excitement, and some got up from their benches. But the man called Esteban Audelo retained his seat and watched and listened.

Almost immediately there came from the direction of the kitchen sounds indicating a riot. Sergeant Garcia was bellowing denunciations, the landlord was squealing like a frightened pig, a male voice was raised in lamentations and cries of pain and declarations that its owner had done nothing wrong, and the two peon kitchen maids were screaming.

ADDED to this din were the sounds of furniture being broken, of crockery being crashed against the flagstone floor. Everybody in the big common room of the tavern was on his feet now with the exception of Diego Vega and the man who

called himself Esteban Audelo.

The latter continued sipping his wine and watching the door of the patio as if amused. He gestured to a frightened peon servant to refill his wine goblet, and the peon was so nervous he spilled the wine.

"What ails you, fellow?" Diego overheard Esteban Audelo ask. "Are you perhaps concerned in this affair?" And that only frightened the servant more.

The half-intoxicated trooper who had been in the common room had followed Sergeant Garcia into the patio. Now he returned, driving the excited landlord before him and holding the door open wide.

Garcia appeared. His uniform was disordered, his face was a picture of rage mingled with determination. He was pulling along the hapless cook, a tall and rather skinny man whose eyes were bulging and whose face was bruised and splotched with fresh blood. Sergeant Garcia evidently had treated him roughly.

Behind them came one of the peon kitchen maids, hanging her head and weeping, plainly enough suffering from terror.

Diego knew the girl. Her father had worked for the Vega rancho until about a year before, when he had been killed by a fall from a horse. Her mother had died long before that, and she had kept house for her father in a miserable hut. Since getting employment at the tavern, she had lived with an old woman, sharing the expenses of food.

"This is an affair for the *magistrado* to settle!" Sergeant Garcia was shouting. "No doubt both of you are rogues. Since you give each other the lie, this not for me to decide. I am a rough soldier, not a solver of riddles!"

He yanked the cook into the middle of the room as those present began pressing back against the walls, and the trooper took the girl by the arm and hustled her toward the outside door.

Esteban Audelo arose from his bench and strode forward as Diego watched. The stranger was smiling slightly as he stopped before Garcia and his prisoner.

"We meet again, Pedro," Audelo said to the cook.

The cook rolled his eyes and tried to kneel. "Save me, Señor Audelo!" he howled. "Tell them I am an honest man. I do not understand the meaning of this—"

Esteban Audelo silenced him with a gesture, and spoke to Garcia: "I knew this man in Monterey. He cooked for a *posada* there. I vouch for his honesty."

"And who vouches for yours, señor?" Garcia barked at him. "You are a stranger here."

"Your *capitán* knows me," Audelo declared. "I have established my identity with him. I have come here as an agent of men of wealth, to see if I can buy a large rancho for them. I have taken a house at the edge of the pueblo—"

"Come along with us to the *magistrado*," Garcia invited. "The trial will be an open meeting. And you, Don Diego Vega. I hate to trouble you, *amigo*, but if you will kindly come to the trial—? It will be a great help. You saw the letter Z on the tortilla. Ha! Landlord! Wrap those tortillas carefully and fetch them along. They are evidence." . . . .

THE *magistrado* was a runt of a man with a bald head and eyes that squinted. He curried favor from those in power, and there was no question concerning his honesty, since all men knew he was dishonest.

As Diego seated himself on a front bench, he looked at the man about to pass judgment, and several thoughts came into his mind. Things were happening in too orderly a fashion. Everything seemed to be going by prearranged plan. The *magistrado* was here in his office already to proceed, when it was notorious that usually he had to be sought when he was needed.

The sergeant told his story quickly, and Diego informed the *magistrado* concerning the marked tortilla, which was exhibited as evidence. The frightened landlord said that he had hired the cook and knew nothing about him except that he was a good cook.

The judge questioned Pedro Gomez.

"I know nothing of it, Excellency," the cook declared. "I got the order to prepare the special tortillas. While I mixed the honey and fruit paste, I had this girl bake the tortillas and keep them hot. For this dish, they are baked fresh, not cold ones warmed up."

"Did you not scratch the letter Z on

that tortilla?" the *magistrado* demanded.

"No Excellency! I ordered the girl to bake the tortillas. When everything was ready, I put the honey and jelly on them. I did not notice the letter Z—the landlord was in haste for the plate. The girl must have scratched the letter in the dough herself!"

Diego watched the peon girl carefully. It was possible she had found herself in trouble and wished to contact Zorro and get him to aid her, and had taken that crude way of trying it. She was so frightened she scarcely could speak.

"Why did you scratch the letter in the dough?" the *magistrado* yelled at her. "Tell the truth, instantly! Was it a warning to this notorious Zorro? Does he frequent the tavern? Tell me his identity!"

She protested between sobs that she knew nothing . . . she did not know Zorro, had not made the letter on the tortilla, was innocent of all wrong-doing.

"You speak falsely," the judge decided. "It is my belief that you know the identity of Zorro and refuse to divulge it. I hold Pedro Gomez, the cook, blameless since he has been vouched for by Señor Esteban Audelo. And I find you guilty of conspiring to defeat the ends of justice. What is your name?"

"Anita Gonzales señor."

"You, Anita Gonzales, I sentence to pay a fine of two gold pieces forthwith."

The girl began screaming. It would take her years to earn that much money, she declared. She was innocent! Could not the *magistrado* be merciful?

"You cannot pay?" the judge asked, knowing well she could not. "Then if anyone cares to pay the amount I shall sentence you in peonage to him until you work out the money at a wage to be settled by the court."

Diego straightened slightly in his seat. The odor of this affair was a thickening stench. The fine was double what it should have been. And this rush to sell the girl into peonage—

"Your honor, I have just engaged a house, and need a maid to work for me," Esteban Audelo was saying. "I'll pay the girl's fine immediately and take her in peonage."

"I thank you, Señor Audelo. The papers will be ready at once," the *magistrado* said.

More rush, Diego thought. Something was behind all this. He arose and stepped forward and addressed the *magistrado*.

"I do not believe this girl guilty," Diego declared. "Her father worked on our rancho until he was accidentally killed, and she kept the hut for him. Allow me to pay her fine and release her."

The eyes of the *magistrado* gleamed. "Ah, Don Diego! You should have spoken sooner," he said. "I have already stated that she goes in peonage to Señor Audelo. Perhaps the señor will release her to you on your payment of the fine."

Audelo shook his head. "I regret that I need a maid badly at my house, and this girl is no doubt a good cook since she has been working in the tavern kitchen."

PEDRO GOMEZ had been released and had hurried away with the landlord. Sergeant Garcia and his trooper went outside. Diego followed them, brushing his nostrils with his scented handkerchief. Soon he saw Esteban Audelo come from the office of the *magistrado* with the weeping girl following him. Diego saw something else that gave him thought—a swift exchange of glances between Audelo and Sergeant Manuel Garcia, and a wink by the former which made the big sergeant grin.

As he strolled homeward thoughtfully, Diego retained his usual pose of a half-awake, spineless fop. He found his august father, Don Alejandro, in the patio, and after a servant had furnished them refreshment and withdrawn, Diego told his father of the entire proceeding.

"What do you think, my father?" he asked, finally.

"Collusion, obviously, between our *magistrado*, a man we know to be a scoundrel, this Esteban Audelo and the local soldiery," Don Alejandro replied. "What is behind it, I have not decided. My son, do you think those marked tortillas were served you purposely?"

"It is hard to tell," Diego replied. "I do not consider that the landlord had anything to do with it."

"And the girl—?"

"I doubt her guilt in the matter. It would have been a stupid way to attract Zorro's attention, if she is in trouble and wants his help. However, such a girl is not noted for much wisdom."

"Can it be possible that the whole thing is only a means of letting this Esteban Audelo get his hands on the girl? There are men of that sort. Pay a fine, get a girl in peonage, get her into his house— It has been done before."

"It follows," Diego said, "that the *magistrado* would have to be in the deal, and also the cook. If the girl did not scratch that letter in the tortilla dough, the cook must have done so. He looks like a sly rascal."

"If he did, he must be in this Audelo's pay."

"True, my father. And there remain the glances and wink that passed between Audelo and the sergeant. I know Garcia fairly well; he may be a rogue in some things, but I doubt he would help play such a game against a girl."

"Would he if there was a piece of gold in it?"

"I doubt it," Diego replied. "If it was some high officer of the army for whom he engineered the affair, with preferment and promotion as result, I could understand it. The thing now, as I see it, is to rescue Anita Gonzales. I am quite sure she is a good girl."

A servant came into the patio and bowed, and said that Fray Felipe, of the chapel, was calling.

DIEGO and his father stood as the padre was ushered into the patio. They served him wine, and looked at him inquiringly.

"The matter of the girl sold a short time ago in peonage—" the padre hinted.

"We were just discussing it," Don Alejandro told him. "If the girl is in danger, she must be saved. That will be a task for —Zorro."

"I fear for her," Fray Felipe said. "This man Audelo—I know him."

"You know him, padre?" Don Alejandro sat erect and Diego did the same.

"I knew him in Monterey—that is, knew of him," Fray Felipe explained. "He was a *capitán* on the staff of the Viceroy in Mexico, and whenever the Viceroy wished a man of rank removed, this Esteban Audelo picked a quarrel with him, fought a duel—and the man was removed."

"Ah!" Diego said.

"As far as I know, the man is still a *capitán* and in the service of the Governor," the padre added.

"Is he the sort who would arrange to get his clutches on such a girl?" Don Alejandro asked.

"He is. He is known as a dissolute man, a high gambler, a notorious rake," the padre replied.

"Then the thing commences to be plain," Don Alejandro declared. "He wanted the girl in his house, got the *magistrado* to help him for a price, arranged the whole thing—"

"Pardon me, my father, but I understand the man has been in the pueblo for only a very short time," Diego said. "Not long enough to observe the girl often and develop an infatuation for her."

"Um!" Don Alejandro grew thoughtful again.

"However, the girl must be rescued," Diego continued. 'As you said, it is a task for Zorro. Merely getting her out of the rogue's house will not be difficult for Zorro. But she must be hidden afterward. And we dare not have her sent to the rancho, for that would show the interest of the Vega family in the affair."

"Leave it to Zorro," Don Alejandro suggested. "I am sure he will find a way." He smiled upon his son.

With nightfall came a mist that swept over the hills from the sea. It swirled around the buildings, dripped from the trees and eaves, made those who went abroad bundle up against its penetrating dampness.

Toward the middle of the night, confusion was added. Into the town from a big rancho came a herd of cattle being driven to the east. The tired, sleepy cattle bawled until the town rang with the sound and milled endlessly around the plaza. Shouting vaqueros drove them back from wandering into the side streets and passages while other vaqueros hurried to the tavern for wine. It was a regulation that no herd could be driven through the town on the highway except during the middle of the night.

Diego Vega got out of his father's house unseen, to hurry through the mist to an abandoned hut at some distance, where his mute servant, Bernardo, waited for him, having been told during the time of the evening meal that Zorro would be abroad that night.

"I do not need the horse tonight, Ber-

nardo," Diego told him. "Only Zorro's clothes and weapons. You will await me here."

He dressed rapidly in the Zorro costume, which he donned over his regular clothes; he buckled on Zorro's sword, examined the pistol and thrust it into his sash, and put the hood and mask over his head. Then he slipped into the depths of the misty night, merging into the darkness, his black costume a part of the night. He carried with him the long heavy whip with which he often had given terrible punishment.

The *magistrado* was a widower who lived alone in a poor house at the edge of the pueblo, hiring a peon woman to come once a week to do the cleaning. He ate at the tavern at a special discount rate granted by the reluctant landlord as a method of protection and favoritism if he ever found himself in trouble with the Law.

ZORRO hurried to this house through the swirling mist. He entered through a rear window which he found open and shortly thereafter appeared before the *magistrado,* who sat at a table scanning documents. The official gave a squawk of fear when he saw the masked man before him, and slumped down in his chair.

"You have guessed my identity, señor?" Zorro asked.

"You—you are Zorro? You have come to rob me?"

"I am Zorro. I have come to punish you, señor, for what you did today. How much gold did you get for releasing that girl in peonage to Esteban Audelo?"

"Audelo? Gold?" the man gulped. "I—I but did my duty in the matter."

The long whip cracked out, and the cringing magistrate howled as the lash bit into his fat body.

"Señor Zorro, let me explain," he begged. "This man came to me and offered me gold to do it—"

"Do what?"

"If they were brought before me—the cook and the girl—I was to listen to their stories, let the cook go and fine the girl heavily and release her in peonage. I thought nothing of it, Señor Zorro, except that this man of wealth and position wanted the girl in his house."

"It was nothing to you that an innocent girl might be ruined by this man with gold in his purse? The Laws mean nothing to you?"

The whip shot out again and bit. The magistrate howled, and began begging for mercy.

"Give me the gold you got!" Zorro ordered. "Every coin! It will go into the poor box at the chapel. Empty your purse, scoundrel!"

Whimpering, the magistrate did as ordered. Zorro stuffed the pouch away in his sash.

"Resign your office tomorrow," Zorro ordered. "Do not forget it, and do not think that any official protection can save you if you do not. Fail to resign and I'll visit you again and carve my sign in your foul heart!"

"I—I'll resign," the *magistrado* agreed.

"What do you know of this affair?"

"Nothing except what I have told you, Señor Zorro. I but did my share as ordered."

The whip lashed out again and again, until the official was cowering on the floor, his arms wrapped around his head, his squawls in competition with the wind that had begun to rage outside.

Zorro darted from the house, coiling his whip. He went swiftly through the fine rain that was commencing to fall, this time to the house which had been engaged by Señor Esteban Audelo.

Zorro knew the house, one of the oldest in the town. It had been repaired for its present tenant. But there was a patio with a crumbled wall, and a garden that was a tangled mass.

In a corner of the dark patio, Zorro crouched to watch and listen. If he was to encounter danger tonight, this would be the place, he knew.

He hooked the coiled whip to a belt over his sash, and got out his pistol, and then went slowly and cautiously along the old patio wall toward a window through which came a shaft of light. That light meant that Esteban Audelo possibly had not retired.

The noise of the milling herd a short distance away covered what slight sounds Zorro made. The smell of cattle was in the damp air. The vaqueros were shouting and singing, and their voices told they had been drinking heavily at the tavern.

Zorro reached the patio door to find it

unlocked. He opened it carefully and slipped inside. He was in a hallway dark except for the streak of light that came from the room beyond. He heard voices, and went along the hallway like a shadow and got near the door of the room.

HE PEERED in. Esteban Audelo was sprawled in a big chair at the end of a long table upon which were two candelabra with tapers burning brightly. He held a goblet of wine and was laughing up at the terrified girl who had just poured the drink for him. Anita Gonzales' face was pale and her eyes wide with fear.

"Do not be alarmed, my pretty one," Audelo was saying to her. "I mean you no harm. Were I inclined to a love adventure, there are certain dainty señoritas I know. A peon girl, regardless of how pretty she may be, is not to my liking."

He gulped the wine, and motioned for her to fill the goblet again, which she did nervously.

"You, my pretty, are but bait for a trap," Esteban Audelo continued. "After the trap is sprung, you will be released from your peonage, and I'll have returned to me the gold I paid as your fine. So cease being frightened."

"I am—what did you say, señor?" she asked.

"Bait for a trap. 'Tis this fellow Zorro I want. And how easier to get in touch with him than by what was done today? He rushes around in a mask protecting peons and natives, does he not?"

"You would—would meet him, señor?" Anita asked.

"That is my desire. You know him?"

"But no, señor! Nobody knows his identity. I have heard the peons and natives talking of it. He is what you call a big mystery."

"He'll be a dead mystery when I'm done with him," Audelo boasted. "I'll tell you a secret, my pretty—I was sent here to finish off this Señor Zorro the soldiers seem unable to catch. A great swordsman, is he? Ha! We shall see as to that. I am not without skill with a blade, my pigeon. If he walks into the trap, you will have the rare delight of watching me play with the rogue for a time and then run him through. He does not know he will be facing a man who worked for the Viceroy and settled His Excellency's enemies."

"You would—kill him?" the girl asked.

"Certainly. And strip the mask off his face and see his features. And then return to Monterey and spend the gold the affair will bring me. If only the rogue comes!"

Holding his pistol ready, Zorro strode into the room. "I am here, Señor Audelo," he said.

Audelo bent forward, his palms flat upon the table, his feet braced beneath him. Anita gave a cry of fear and cringed against the wall. Her arrest and doom to peonage, her fear of her employer, and now the sudden appearance of this masked man with a pistol—the culmination unnerved her.

Zorro was watching Audelo carefully. "Well, señor?" he said. "I am here, as you can see."

"And as I desire it, señor," Audelo returned. "Do you intend to pistol me? Let me tell you that you have walked into a trap."

"I'll walk out of it, señor, when I have dealt with you."

"Señor Zorro, you'll never leave this room alive. If you shoot me down, others will be at your throat. Sergeant Garcia and his troopers are stationed at every door. They were in hiding, awaiting you, and no doubt witnessed your entrance to the house. You found the door unlocked, did you not?" Audelo laughed.

ZORRO swerved around the table so no door would be at his back. He did not doubt that Audelo spoke truth. He was in a trap, had walked into it blindly. But he had been in traps before.

"Señor Zorro, I have heard overmuch of your skill with the blade," Audelo was saying. "I believe you are badly overrated. If you do not care to pistol me, suppose we see which of us is the better swordsman."

"I soil my blade if I fight you," Zorro said.

"Ah! So you are gentle born?"

"I am."

"That need be no hindrance, señor. So am I," Audelo declared.

"You foul your blood, then!"

"Señor!" Audelo raged, getting out of his chair, but keeping his palms flattened on the table. "I am a *capitán* in the service of the Viceroy, and also in the service of His Excellency the Governor of Alta Cali-

fornia. Do I qualify?"

"Draw your blade, señor. On guard!" Zorro replied. "And kindly be honorable enough, in this instance, to fight me without aid from any troopers who may be near."

Audelo's eyes blazed. "I will fight you fairly," he declared, "and as I fight I will be remembering that remark."

"Let the girl go home," Zorro requested, "since she has served her purpose here. She will only be in our way."

Without glancing at Anita, Audelo spoke, "get you gone. Tell the troopers I have released you."

Zorro heard her gasp, then the swish of skirts as she hurried from the room. Audelo stepped away from the table, back toward the wall, and his hand went to the hilt of his blade. Zorro heard steps in the hallway, saw a face at a door, and knew that Audelo had spoken the truth—troopers were all around him.

"Into the trap you came, like a foolish rabbit," Audelo chuckled, as he prepared for fight. "The cook was put in the tavern at my order, and he marked all the hot tortillas. I thought word of it would get to Zorro, and that after the girl was blamed and bound in peonage to me Zorro would try a rescue. Well, señor, here you are!"

AUDELO whipped out his blade, Zorro lunged forward, and they were at it.

Knowing this man's reputation for ability with a blade, Zorro moved with extreme caution. The first few seconds were enough to reveal to him that here was a rare swordsman, that perhaps this time he was fighting for his life. Audelo's eyes were mere gleaming slits, and his lips were set in a firm straight line. The expression of a killer was in his face.

The blades rang, the room was heavy with their breathing as they fought. From the near distance came the bawling of the cattle around the plaza, and the wild cries of the vaqueros. The tapers in the two candelabra on the long table cast a good light.

Audelo attacked, and Zorro retreated around the table and to the wall, but there stood and engaged furiously. And then Audelo attacked again, with great fury, but only to be beaten back.

Zorro became the aggressor in turn, drove his adversary aside and backward, Audelo turning aside every trick he tried.

"So you have met your master at last?" Audelo cried.

Zorro felt the tip of the other's blade rip his sleeve. A slight fear came to him. And he remembered that he must be the victor here, else be slain and his identity revealed. And that would bring double sorrow to his father, for old Don Alejandro would grieve at the passing of his son and heir, and also because he would be exposed as a man with a price upon his head. No doubt the Governor would even confiscate the Vega estate.

Those thoughts gave him added courage, and he renewed the combat with vigor. He felt Audelo giving way before him, and his caution was renewed. But in a moment he knew this was no trick, that the man before him was tiring, was not so certain of victory as he had been.

Zorro urged the fighting again. And when he felt that he was to have the victory he considered other things. Victory over this man would not be enough, if Garcia and his troopers were standing ready to seize him. He must win, and then escape.

He gave ground, let Audelo come after him, and finally got close to the long table again with an open window behind him. And again he pressed the fighting, suddenly and unexpectedly, and Audelo was caught off guard. Zorro's blade darted out, he lunged, and the *capitán* of the Viceroy dropped his sword and started to fall forward, blood gushing from the wound in his breast.

Zorro sprang backward. His blade swept in a wide arc and sent a candelabra crashing to the floor from the table, the tapers being extinguished. Another sweep of the blade, the second candelabra crashed, and the room was in darkness. And, even as Sergeant Garcia's voice bellowed a warning, Zorro was through the window and in the tangled garden.

He heard men crashing toward him, and turned and ran, blade still in hand. Through the swirls of mist and fine falling rain he charged the short distance down the side street to the corner of the plaza.

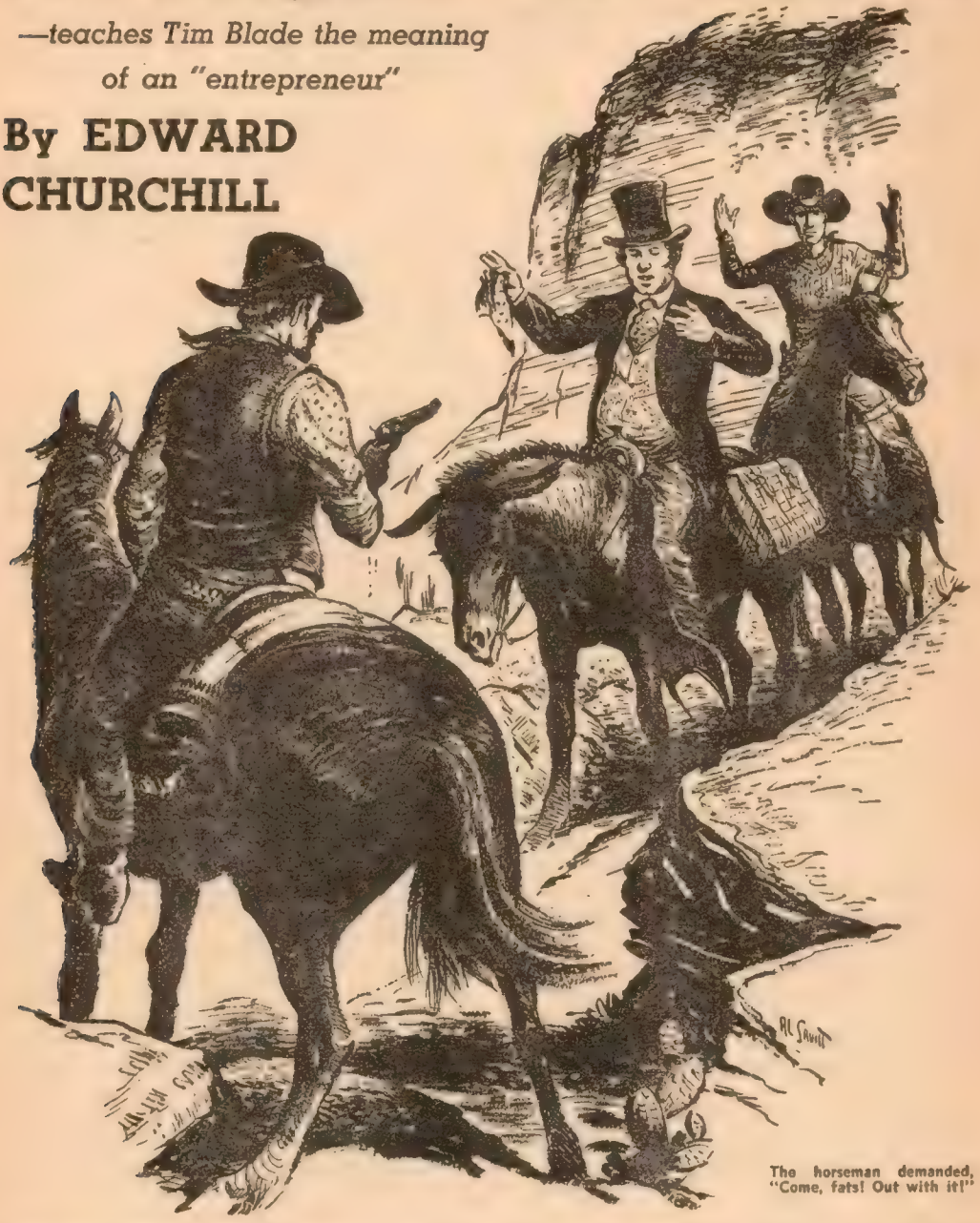
Cattle were milling there as the half-intoxicated vaqueros tried to herd them on their journey again. And Zorro was among

(Concluded on page 94)

A Night in Town

—teaches Tim Blade the meaning of an "entrepreneur"

By EDWARD CHURCHILL



The horseman demanded, "Come, fats! Out with it!"

WITH a rush and clatter of hoofs, the crack of a whip, the hollow protestation of iron-tired wheels on gravel, the swift bulk of the Tucson-Benton stage turning the calm of a late spring afternoon into bedlam swayed by me toward Benton.

I had pulled my pinto off the narrow

track through the brush to let her scorch by, a plunging behemoth of weather-beaten wood, steaming leather and horse sweat, and this won a cheery wave of thanks from "Porky" Evans, the plump driver, and "Slim" Sweeney, the gaunt, shotgunned guard.

But these were nothing compared to that other greeting which came from the window of the battered, paint-peeled coach. First I saw the small white hand, fluttering an excited handkerchief. Then for an instant I saw honey-colored hair. This was topped by a tiny, impish straw hat.

I saw wide, eager cornflower eyes and a pert, inquisitive nose, to say nothing of a soft, full mouth that said without words that the world was new and exciting and wonderful and full of fun. There was, too, a flash of a gay blue dress with white ruffles on it—and then the stage was gone, leaving me choking in the cloak of dust it had thrown over the road.

As I rode onward, watching the dust fall out of the air, leaving the sky as blue as turquoise except in the west, where it was hot, molten gold around the sun, I wondered about that beautiful vision apparently alone in this man's frontier—a dry, searing vastness of burning, treeless mountains, g a m b l i n g halls, saloons, shacks, lean-tos, unpainted houses, brawls and gunfights. For that was Arizona in the nineties, when I was slim and lean and tanned and had the hungry song of youth in my heart—a lilting music now gone forever, save for a melancholy echo.

I prayed she was stopping in squat, wooden Benton, which appeared to have been stacked carelessly on the desert by a giant hand. I prayed that I would see her in the lobby of the luxurious Continental Hotel. I felt sad as I conjured a lover, preceding her into this desolate, mountain-ringed country to make his fortune, embracing her on arrival. I tortured myself with this thought until I substituted a stalwart brother, a stout mother and a gray-haired father.

I had raised and waved my broad-brimmed hat and I grinned foolishly as I realized I was still holding it in my hand. My imagination had carried me to a point where we were eating dinner in a booth at the Silver Pheasant, the best eating house west of El Paso, run by my genial friend, old Hing Far Low. I replaced the hat, and hoped the tonsorial parlor would still be open so I could receive much-needed attention before meeting my blonde beauty.

At the same time the road turned. The way ahead had been hidden by a pile of huge, dun-colored rocks which might have been stacked by the same giant hand which had created Benton. Here, I'd been told, the Tucson-Benton stage had been held up eight years before, the guard killed, the driver wounded, and more than ten thousand dollars in silver bullion taken, to say nothing of everything of value which the passengers had possessed.

As I rounded the curve, I found to my disappointment that no masked road agents were laying siege to the stage and its fascinating feminine cargo, that I could not dash to the aid of this blue-eyed collection of loveliness, for the stage was now only a fading, unromantic cloud of dust approaching Benton and the mountains cradling it, treeless and man-scarred by the mines.

Instead, I saw what amounted to an apparition.

IN THE many years I have been on the desert I have found everything from sidewinders to Pueblo ceremonial dances, but this topped them all. It consisted, at first sight, of a mountainous man of huge beam astride a too-small mule. Over this strange character was an umbrella.

As I overtook him—my pinto had far more energy and less to carry than the sad-eared mount ahead—the great mound took human shape, after its own fashion. Boots? No indeed. City gaiters, covered with gray spats. Broadcloth trousers, once black but now turned a dirty green by years of wear. A huge gray cutaway, which looked like a tent. A collar with turned-down points and a frayed tie. All these shocked my vision as I drew abreast, the tie hiding its forlorn ends in a multi-colored silk vest which had collected the tactical errors of several meals.

Above the too-large celluloid collar around the oddly skinny neck, was a face as round as a full moon and redder than a sun setting into a smoky horizon. As you looked at it, even at the end of a hot desert afternoon, you could hear the

tinkle of Kris Kringle's sleighbells. Blue eyes twinkled from caverns made by encroaching fat. The smiling mouth was thick-lipped, and the chins were three.

Between the cream-puff cheeks, however, was the most remarkable nose I have yet beheld. It was not only large, but its color was that of a mature tomato, begging to be plucked from the vine. On top of this strangely attractive collection of features was a lumpy forehead which in turn supported a Lincolnesque stovepipe hat.

As I gazed at the bags, cartons and battered valise hanging from thongs which seemed to be attached to all parts of the saddle, and a rifle scabbard which now housed a Malacca cane, the voice rumbled like a volcano deep in a great mountain.

"Greetings, my good fellow-traveler!" The boom was sincere. "A great day to bask in the glories of nature, is it not?"

"Fair to middlin'," I replied. Curiosity got the better of my courtesy. "Why the umbrella?" I asked.

He shook his head sadly, and I readily accepted this invitation to pity him.

"My proboscis," he lamented, "seems to have a tendency to cerise under the attacks of this burning desert sun."

I looked from his nose to the sunset.

"It's almost gone, now," I suggested.

"Why, so it is!" He lowered the umbrella, closed it, and installed it beside the cane in the rifle scabbard. "And what is your name, my good man?" he demanded.

I told him it was Tim Blade, that I was twenty-three, that I worked on the Lazy K, that this was my monthly night off. I usually resented such personal probings, but I answered in spite of myself. I found myself belatedly shocked after I had confided—by some compulsion on his part that I didn't understand—that I possessed fifty dollars, a month's wages, and that it would probably go the way of all the rest paid me for honest work by Hobey Bronson, who ran the Lazy K spread.

By this time, we were riding by the broken-down shanties which heralded Benton, their outlines softened by the generosity of dusk. I realized that I knew nothing about my strange companion and ventured a few questions. I asked him his name. He produced a soiled card from his multicolored vest, passed it over to me with a discomfited grunt.

I read:

THADDEUS PHINEAS GRIBBLE
ENTREPRENEUR
NEW YORK

I was puzzling over that strange word "entrepreneur", and was about to put the card into the pocket of my best flannel shirt when he held out a pudgy hand.

"I'll trouble you to return that," he said. "It's engraved, you know—and out in this violent country engravers are few and far between." He paused, took the pasteboard and added: "A strange inner sense tells me that you are probing your depths in an effort to encompass my profession."

"Somethin' like that," I admitted.

"Our mutual friend, Daniel Webster, states in his lexicon that an entrepreneur is one who as an employer assumes the risk and management of a business. As I have no fixed business and no employees, I think of myself as one who simply assumes risks."

"A gambler," I said.

"Precisely!"

BY THIS time we were in the heart of Benton, surrounded by milling miners, creaking ore wagons, buckboards, torches which burned bright welcome in front of saloons, gambling halls and cafes; there were women in gingham, ladies in silk, and gentlemen in broadcloth. And I was absorbing the activity with customary elation. The Continental—and possibly the girl with the cornflower eyes—was just ahead.

My strange acquaintance asked me the best lodgings and I pointed docilely, as if accepting him as a friend who would share my fortunes. I explained that this was the finest inn west of the Rio Grande, for so I had been told.

"Only the best for a Gribble," he remarked as he gingerly lowered his great bulk from the mule, the animal making itself lopsided to compensate for the off-center weight.

It didn't seem to me then, bemused as I was, that it was unusual for me to help a comparative stranger unload his amazing assortment of duffel and then carry it

inside to the desk while he led the way, swinging his cane.

He inquired for the best accommodations, then signed the register with noble flourishes, after which I greeted the clerk and put down my modest handle under the gaslight. I saw the feminine handwriting then, neat and round and compelling. I pointed to it, rolling the name on my tongue.

It had a lilting, musical quality—Marilyn Malone. St. Louis.

"Golden hair, Jimmy, and the brightest blue eyes ever! Came in on the stage," I said.

"That's her." The clerk winked as my heart slammed against my ribs. So far, I'd had my prayer answered!

Gribble suggested in a most generous manner that I could share his suite, for that was what he had engaged. I accepted with a willingness that surprised me, as if I'd been planning on an invitation from him for weeks. Jimmy timidly suggested pay in advance, whereupon my suitemate announced with forgiving solemnity:

"To a Gribble, request for advance payment is an insult, sir! I shall make due compensation after I have tested the nature of your hospitality!"

"As long as you're with Tim Blade," Jimmy replied, without batting an eye, "your credit is good."

I could see Gribble's opinion of me go up a notch as he looked at me with new interest, then turned and waddled majestically up the stairs—and I, laden with his baggage and mine, brought up a panting second. After gasping admiringly around the rooms, which Gribble took with about as much interest as a well-fed cow would regard a stretch of malapi, we proceeded to clean up.

When the mirror showed that I was pink and damp and that my long hair was neatly combed, I walked into Gribble's room and suggested the lobby.

"By all means!" he agreed.

We went below, my mind concentrating on the tonsorial visit, my large friend swinging his cane.

What I saw made me lose all interest in the barbershop, the assorted seductive scents and a neat trim cut round in the back; in my new flannel shirt and my hand-tailored pants; in a thorough oiling of my dusty, thorn-scratched high-heeled boots.

Marilyn Malone was there, all right. But around her slim waist was a masculine arm, pressing her upturned, inviting lips were the comparatively thin, hard ones of a man of my own age. He was flat-hipped in a neat business suit; shiny in city gaiters and oiled hair; possessive and happy and secure in her affection. I also saw the diamond solitaire on the ring finger of her left hand as it crept clingingly up his back.

The second chapter of my dream exploded in my face like a .45 and I felt the need of going into a dark corner of the lobby and sitting down. I had recognized the good-looking fellow; he had been imported from St. Louis only a few months before to become cashier of the Benton National Bank.

Gribble seemed to notice neither my shock nor the depths of my despair, for he said:

"And now, Tim, my mind turns to items gustative—where will we find a restaurant suitable to our tastes?"

Mechanically, and almost without conscious volition, I told him that the Silver Pheasant had good food. Without looking at the couple—I was sadly conjuring up the vision of the brother, the stout mother and the white-haired father and at the same time realizing no brother would kiss like that—Gribble heaved his bulk through the door into the torch-flickering street.

AT THE Silver Pheasant I greeted my good friend, Hing Far Low, with nothing more than an absent nod; paid little attention to the huge bourbon with which Gribble set himself for his large steak, fried potatoes, assorted vegetables, and immense hunk of pie. I ate only sparingly, my mind securely and fiendishly enwrapped in painful and sharp recollections of the affectionate tableau in the Continental lobby.

It didn't, at the moment, seem ludicrous that I, who had dreamed of a tete-a-tete here with Marilyn—I indulged myself by using her first name—was now opposite a Gargantua who was busily and lustily surrounding a vast collection of food with wordless gusto the like of which I'd never seen.

I came back to my drab little world only when Gribble smacked his thick lips appreciatively, scoured the mountains and valleys of his face with his napkin, regarded the check the waitress left, and announced:

"Tomorrow, I will have to do with the local financiers, tonight I am, let us say, impecunious."

He was handing me the check and I took it, paid the waitress.

"And now," he said, after he had got back his breath from the exertion of rising, "agaming we shall go. It will be a joust with percentages with which I am all too familiar. I shall introduce you, Tim, thanks to your generosity, to the famed Thaddeus Phineas Gribble System of Modulated Play, devised and perfected by myself after many consultations with the famed astrologist Adr Ali Singh, in my own metropolis of New York. Where away?"

Dazzled by this information, I contemplated the main street. He leaned his huge bulk on his cane, bending it.

"The Golden Nugget," I said, "is probably the most honest."

"Honesty," he replied, "is a too-little-practiced virtue. You have noticed, of course, that a horse never bets on a man?"

I told him I hadn't thought of it in that way and we went up the street toward the Golden Nugget, which had the most and biggest torches on the whole thoroughfare. On the way I encountered the change of pronouns. As he spoke, "yours," referring to me, became "ours", and "you", referring to me, became "us".

I didn't remember this until later, for I was wondering where Marilyn and her fiancé were—anticipating the sweet pain of encountering them again. By this time I was turning her young banker, whose name I now remembered was Slocum, into a black-hearted villain and I was designing all sorts of dire predicaments from which I might rescue her. An explanation of Gribble's System of Modulated Play smote against my ears—a series of selected, analysed, added-and-subtracted numbers used in betting roulette.

I remember once muttering:

"I shoot dice."

"Pooh! Vulgar!" Gribble exclaimed, waving imaginary dice away with his cane. "By using a combination of signs of the zodiac—of course, you must know the position of the stars at a given moment and I've already given this important matter my studied attention—it's simply impossible to lose!"

We pushed our way along the plank sidewalk. I was conscious of people turning to look at my companion. We finally went through the batwings and found ourselves in a crowded room as big as a barn.

Smoke hung in the air. I looked around me and thought of ants I had seen outside the bunkhouse clustering around pieces of something they liked. In this case, the pieces were the tables and the ants were a lot of men and a few women. Somebody was playing a piano, which tinkled monotonously to a heavy undercurrent of rhythm. There were percentage girls around some tables, where I'd often sat with them. The bar was three deep.

BY GOING in behind Gribble, whose costume had brought disbelief to the eyes of those who beheld him, I had no trouble finding a place at the roulette table. I bought dollar chips.

"We'll play five dollars on three," he said, "just to warm up."

I put them on the number and the ball dropped into a square on the wheel numbered twenty-seven. Gribble covered his brow with a fat hand, closed his eyes, and apparently held a consultation with his good friend, Adr Ali Singh.

"Now," he told me, "to get back, we'll place five on the black. I must have misinterpreted the signs."

A red came up. I absently noted it was in the thirties. The play seemed to be heaviest on the low numbers, the pay on the high.

The Gribble System of Modulated Play worked fast, assisted by the zodiac and Adr Ali Singh, to say nothing of the position of the stars, which were obscured by smoke and roof at the moment. After bets on several low numbers I called the entrepreneur's attention to the fact that we had but a small amount of change left—too little to be acceptable to the house. But, by this time, I didn't care.

Slocum and Marilyn Malone were at the crowded table. Slocum, I saw, had the

feverish look only born gamblers can get when close to a game. I watched him carelessly scatter chips, and at the same time I saw Marilyn's somewhat startled interest.

Gribble rumbled: "From what I heard at the hotel, I judge that our credit is rated highly. May I suggest that we negotiate to our fiduciary advantage?"

I pointed to a sign which read: POSITIVELY NO CREDIT."

"That goes for Adr Ali Singh, too," I told him.

Gribble's great face sagged like that of a bloodhound which has lost the scent. He was ogling the table. He turned slowly, his hand closing convulsively over my arm. At the same time I saw the croupier sweep in a handful of Slocum's chips. I found myself being dragged by sheer weight to the fringe of the crowd. I rolled a smoke and lighted up.

"If you should vouchsafe my integrity I'm quite sure we would soon be riding the high wave of fortune." There was a plea in his voice. I felt sorry for him.

"The boys that run this joint," I replied, "won't even give their own mother money for a life-saving operation."

All this time Gribble was looking at the table, his eyes narrowing until the flesh made peepholes.

"Tim," he announced, "that table is dishonest, dishonorable, corrupt!"

"If you mean that all the big money is playing the low numbers and the ball is rolling into the high ones, I'll string along with you."

We moved closer so we could observe this interesting phenomenon, which persisted for a considerable length of time. During it, Slocum shelled out more and more for chips, and his face got longer and longer. Little Marilyn, who didn't seem to know what it was all about but sensed trouble, looked worried. I felt sorry for her.

I saw Slocum move disconsolately away from the table.

"Your young man and your beautiful blonde young lady seem to have failed to woo the goddess of fortune," Gribble declared, and the remark rocked me back on my rounded heels. So he'd been taking it in all the time, guessing my mind!

They started for the door.

"I should like to make their acquaintance," he said, swinging his cane airily and started in their direction. They went out. He went out. I followed him. They walked to the corner, First Street, and turned into it, apparently unaware of us. Suddenly Slocum stopped and said something and she threw herself against him, burying her head against his chest.

Right into this turbulent scene stepped Gribble, one pudgy hand sweeping the stovepipe hat from his head and the other trying to make him bend gallantly in the middle. Startled, they parted.

"I am," he announced, "Thaddeus Phineas Gribble, an entrepreneur, of New York."

EVEN in the faint light reflected from the main street, I could see the hard lines of annoyance in Slocum's face. But it was different with Marilyn. She curtsied and said:

"How do you do, sir!"

Gribble swept his arm in my direction, and in a voice that reminded me of the fanfare of trumpets in the opera that had played Benton, exclaimed:

"My good friend, Mr. Timothy Blade of the Lazy K."

I could see that Slocum was confused by the approach. He started to draw on Marilyn's arm, but she stood her ground and said, in a soft melodious voice I'll never forget:

"I am Marilyn Malone and this is George Slocum, my fiancé, and we were to have been married tonight." She looked at me and asked: "Haven't I had the pleasure of seeing you before?"

"You waved to me as you passed me in the stage a few miles back, miss," I managed.

"Come along, Marilyn," Slocum said stiffly. "You've met the gentlemen and—"

"On the other hand, I beg to intercede," Gribble persisted. "Miss Malone makes the statement, 'were to have been married.' Am I to judge that disaster has brought about a change of plans?"

All I can say to describe it is that Marilyn Malone, fifteen hundred miles from her home, and terribly confused, opened the dikes. She let tears run down her cheeks shamelessly, choked, and then she spluttered:

"George went into that horrible gambling place, and before I knew it he'd spent

all the money we'd saved to start out married life and some of the bank's money beside. If I'd known what he was doing—"

"Marilyn!" snapped Slocum in an outraged voice. "These men—perfect strangers—you—"

Now if this was just a plain, ordinary story, Marilyn would have denounced George Slocum as a bounder, a thief, and would have accused him of luring her from the security of St. Louis into the dust-ridden wastes of Arizona to ruin her life, and would have fled him. But Marilyn, sad to relate, was made of finer metal.

She didn't follow the gossamer fabric of my dreams, but turned to Slocum and clung to him as if drowning. Her forgiveness was so eloquent that all hope I might harbor at this time that she'd be rid of him and eventually choose me vanished with the finality of a disbanding whirlwind.

Several other things happened.

Gribble, in his incomprehensible manner, had won George over to the extent that he was finding out the young banker still had forty dollars, which were the erstwhile property of the Benton National Bank. With a flood of eloquence he was persuading George that with the aid of Adr Ali Singh, the stars and the zodiac he could win back his money; that he, Gribble, must lead Marilyn behind a tree for a private conference.

My entrepreneur disappeared with Marilyn, and she came back looking completely bewitched and was making repairs on her coiffure. Gribble gazed at the stars in rapt contemplation and then from the voluminous caverns of his being came this announcement:

"The hour is auspicious; we will be victor in the jousts!" He eyed me speculatively. "I'll take our widow's mite, Tim," he said, "and you will direct me to the nearest apothecary shop."

Seemingly without will, I fished out my remaining change and handed it to him, not as if it left me broke but as if I were possessed with an air which comes with having several thousand dollars in a solid bank.

"Remain here and we will join you shortly," he directed them.

He wouldn't let me go into the drugstore with him and I walked down the wooden sidewalk for a considerable distance. Out of his presence, I found that his veneer was wearing thin. He disintegrated before my clearing mind and I saw him for what he was—a mountebank who had imposed on me to the extent of a hotel suite for which he had no intention of paying and for which I would have to ask credit on the morrow; who had, with vague reference to bankers, induced me to pay for the food he had consumed; who had further stripped me of all worldly wealth by betting my funds both as he saw fit and quite foolishly.

At this point I began to wonder with considerable qualms why he was employing such artifices to acquire the right to throw away forty dollars, the property of two already stricken young people, on a roulette wheel which he had branded as crooked.

GRIBBLE rejoined me with the beaming, benevolent expression of a Santa Claus who had made his generous rounds without incident, and I found my misgivings things of no moment. Again he seemed to be reading my mind, for he said in a hurt way as we walked to our rendezvous:

"Adr Ali Singh demands absolute faith. Without faith, there is nothing."

We found Slocum and Marilyn anxiously waiting. Gribble spoke swiftly.

"George, you will give me eighteen dollars. We will go to the roulette table. When I bet, you bet. We will wager on the small odd numbers, from one to seventeen, and on the big even numbers, twenty to thirty-six. On each you will play a dollar chip and so will I. Each time we will use our winnings to double this entire bet. We will give no sign that we know each other. You go first."

George nodded, went inside. Gribble waited an interval and then sent me along. Then he came in, worked his way to the roulette table, laid his cane on it. I watched the croupier take in large winnings and pay a poorly played low number.

Gribble bet. George also laid a dollar chip on each of the odd lows and the even highs. The ball spun in its race, the wheel with the numbers turning slowly. The ball wavered, dropped into nine. Slocum and Gribble each received thirty-five dol-

lars plus their bets on nine, and now each placed two dollars on the eighteen numbers.

The ball whirled in its race, teetered and dropped into an even number—twenty-eight. Gribble and Slocum each collected seventy dollars and each played four dollars on what were now becoming magic numbers. The little ball lodged in box thirty-two. The dealer, who was six feet two, built like a bull, had heavy eyebrows and a scar down his right cheek, glared at Gribble.

I began to worry. The play went on. When my friends started placing thirty-two dollars on each number, jumping from sixteen, he growled:

"Twenty-dollar limit!"

Slocum and Gribble collected some of their profits, stayed at twenty dollars until the croupier, now furious and ready to jump at anyone's threat, began paying off in gold. By this time, most of the people in the place had surounded the table, including Pegleg Halliday and One-eye Tate, the partner-owners.

Now, each time a number won they each collected seven hundred dollars and lost three hundred and forty on the numbers that didn't pay. The game became one of eyes, the dealer glaring at Gribble, who now had considerable gold stacked in front of him and the cane.

There was no longer fun in Gribble's bulbous face. His eyes were fat-surrounded slits. George was beaming, and each time the ball fell right Marilyn gave little squeals of delight.

I should like to be able to report that Gribble and George broke the bank that night, but I can't. For Gribble saw the ring closing in on him—suspicion mounting in the eyes of the confused, angry dealer; open distrust and a desire to investigate in the taut faces of Pegleg Halliday and One-eye Tate; Beef Bragdon, the guard, chin jutting, hands on the butts of his guns, inching closer.

Just before the exploding point, Gribble picked up his cane, gave George an almost imperceptible nod, cashed in his chips and pushed his way through the wondering, marveling crowd. The huge pockets of his frock coat were so filled with gold that they caused the great garment to sag and make him look even more ludicrous.

Knowing the nocturnal habits of some Benton citizens, I was glad I could guard him and the bulging George with my Colt's .45 slung at my waist.

Gribble went directly to the bar and said: "I would like a libation—not the dram of a child but the drink of a man, in a tumbler."

He downed half a glass of whisky without even blinking, ordered and paid for a quart of rye which he stowed some place about his ample person, and then with ponderous dignity retired to the street. He was greeted by two of the happiest people I have ever seen.

"And now, my children," he thundered, patting Marilyn benevolently on her pretty shoulder, "there was talk of matrimony. Let us hie ourselves to the nearest sanctum of the judiciary so you may be united in wedlock, to proceed through life in connubial bliss."

Only I detected the furtive glance he shot back into the gaming hall.

I WAS an unwilling escort to Justice Shinn's little cottage on Second Street. We woke that worthy, who duly officiated while I watched true happiness flee my ken for evermore. We left, and on the dark street bid the fascinated and grateful pair good-by, my heart beating a dirge and my eyes feasting on that golden hair until it was lost in the shadows.

We started for the Continental, I with head downcast, with feet mired in my desolation. The trip was punctuated by my companion's frequent pulls on his bottle. He startled me by saying:

"It is better that way. She was not the mate for you, my dear Tim."

Somehow I felt better after he said that. I wanted to ask him about the sensational win, but I felt that this was no time for questions, for his detached manner discouraged conversation. I contented myself with the thought that in spite of Gribble's strange, almost psychic abilities, he did not know that it was not the sun which made his nose both bulbous and crimson.

We went upstairs, into the suite together. Gribble wedged the top of a chair against his door, advised me to do likewise and bid me good night, his face beaming. As I went into my room, I heard a low melodic: "Happy, happy children!"

followed by a heavy sigh, a sad, "Ah, me!"

I went to bed and slept as quickly as I closed my eyes. The next morning I awoke to find myself being shaken rudely. Beyond the windows was the dawn, rose-and-orange colored, uninviting.

"I think, my good Tim," said the mountain that bent over me—it was a pink mountain, for that was the color of his nightshirt—"that we should be gone with the dawn. There are certain matters in Tucson—"

"Sure," I said. He left me. I headed for the washbowl and the big pitcher. On the marble top of the table were ten twenty-dollar gold pieces—two hundred dollars. There could be only one reason they were there. I put them in my pocket.

I drenched my face, hair and neck, dried, dressed, went into Gribble's room and found him completely prepared for traveling. The whisky bottle stood empty on the chiffonier.

We went below, Gribble with his jaunty cane, I with the assorted baggage. We woke Jimmy and Gribble gave him a gold piece, disdaining change from one who had indicated doubt of his credit.

I toted the trappings to the stables where Gribble performed with smooth efficiency and great haste, and soon we were bidding good-by to the drooping, painted shacks at the edge of Benton. I screwed up all my nerve, and I asked:

"How did you do it, Mr. Gribble?"

He smiled benignly at me.

"The stars, the zodiac and Adr Ali Singh," he replied, his great voice letting me know that this was as far as the matter would go. He added, "I deeply regret our departure at such a distressing hour, but I fear the zodiac went into slight imbalance."

I thought his fears were groundless until I heard the swift staccato of hoofbeats. Even as I spun in my saddle there was the echo of a shot. It would be enjoyable to set forth that the shot went through Gribble's high silk hat and that it went spinning. But the marksmanship was of poor quality. I swung my mount around realizing that to run was useless, for Gribble's heavily laden mule would have had difficulty retreating from an angry turtle. My gun came out.

"No, no! For heaven's sake, no! Not that!"

I held my fire and turned on Thaddeus Phineas Gribble, to find him not red and rosy but a sickening green, painted by the brush of fear.

"I can drive him off," I said.

Gribble pulled as much of himself together as was possible.

"I abhor bloodshed." His voice was still deep but beset by tremolo. "Particularly, my dear Tim, if it is Gribble blood!"

He withdrew a large handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat and waved it forlornly. The horseman rode in, holding Gribble in his sights. Our hands lifted. I saw that it was the tall, bull-like dealer with the scar down his cheek. His expression of wrath and chagrin was such that I feared he would perforate my large friend. As he reined it, he demanded:

"Come, fats! Out with it!"

Gribble seemed to melt into tallow.

"I know you cheated!" Bullneck blasted. "I spent half the night to find that sticky stuff and the piece of hair. I don't want your money—I just want to know how you did it."

GRIBBLE'S voice was gentle, persuasive as he looked into the muzzle of the .45.

"Ah, yes!" he said. "It's really quite simple. It was the cane. By means of court plaster obtained from the apothecary, I attached a hair to its tip. I laid the cane on your roulette table. While you were busy raking in your lucre, I forced the other end of the hair, coated with gum arabic, also purchased from the apothecary, into the crack between the black strip below the ball race and the ball race itself."

"So!" the dealer exclaimed, the light of dawning understanding on his scarred visage.

"Please don't interrupt!" Gribble soothed. "I then bet on the low odd and the high even numbers, which are all on one side of the wheel. I left the hair lax while the ball passed across it several times. When the correct side of the wheel was in position I moved the cane slightly, tightening the hair across the race. This tripped the ball into that side of the wheel which contained the numbers on which I'd wagered."

"Bravo!" exclaimed the dealer, falling under what I've always thought of as the

Gribble spell. "What kind of hair did you use?"

"The hair of an old woman, tough and gray, not noticeable against the light maple of the wooden wheel."

"Thanks!" The dealer's face was as pleasant as it could ever be with that scar. "I'm quitting the Golden Nugget. I'll make a fortune!"

He turned away, riding madly and firing his gun into the air. We turned our mounts, went onward. Gribble's color had returned to a normal brick-red now, but I still saw him as he had been—green, shaking.

"It was cowardly," I ventured, "to surrender that secret. It's worth millions! I could have shot it out—"

He chuckled.

"That would have entailed risks unnecessary to the true entrepreneur," he replied indulgently. "I gave nothing away. You see, only the young, resilient hirsute adornment of a girl like Marilyn will give properly under stress. The hair of an old one is brittle. I'll snap until he gives up in despair."

I remembered the strange "consultation" behind the tree and pondered the wisdom of this last move.

We were now at the point where I must turn into the brush to get to the Lazy K. I told my friend I must leave him.

"Go, my son," he boomed solemnly, "with Adr Ali Singh!"

I rode into the brush for perhaps a hundred yards, looked back. Thaddeus Phineas Gribble was opening his umbrella, for the sun was now high.

I never saw Gribble again, but often weird tales of his prowess filtered back to Benton. According to the stories, he brought into play the dubious practices of his incredible mentor, Adr Ali Singh, only against those who had unwittingly sought to cheat him.

Nor did I see George and Marilyn Slocum, for almost immediately after his marriage he was transferred to a position of greater trust in a larger bank in Tucson. I, with the swift forgetfulness of youth, became enamoured of a brunette with dark eyes on my next monthly visit to Benton, and married her three months later.

We are proud of our six children and three times as many grandchildren.

No, I've never gambled since that night.

ZORRO'S HOT TORTILLAS

(Concluded from page 84)

them, his blade now in sheath, his black figure bending and dodging and darting. The pursuing troopers could not get at him, could not get around the cattle in time.

Zorro was out of the herd at the mouth of another dark passageway. Through the darkness he sped, the wind drowning all sound of his progress.

And finally he came to where faithful Bernardo was waiting to take the clothes and weapons of Zorro.

A few minutes later Don Diego slipped quietly into his father's house, to find Don Alejandro sitting at a table.

"Everything is well," Diego said. "All I need now is a cup of hot wine, and then some sleep."

When Wily Soldiers Set a Trap for Him, Don Diego Vega Accepts the Challenge in

AN AMBUSH FOR ZORRO

Another Story of Old California

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

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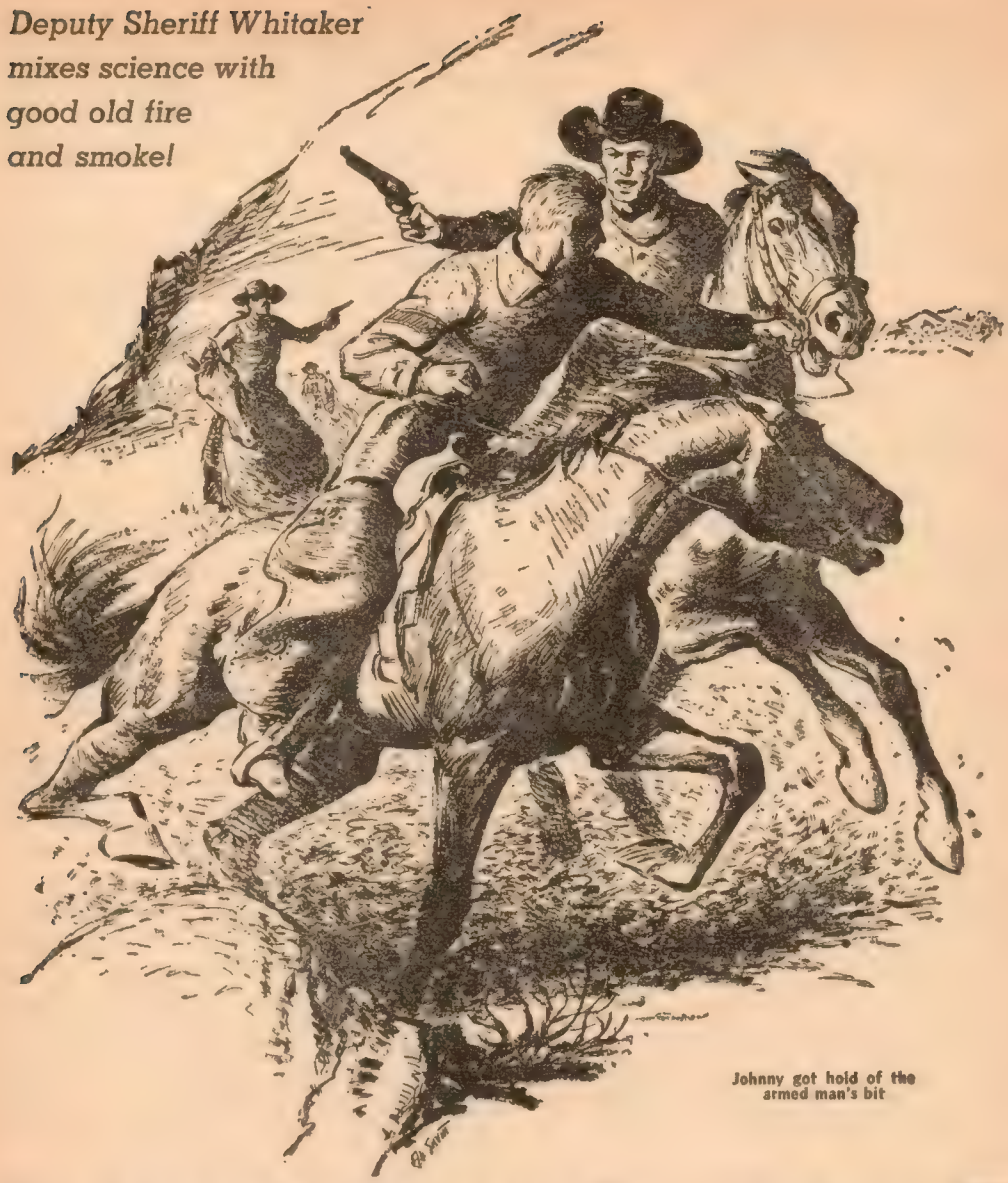
COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE!

Deputy Sheriff Whitaker mixes science with good old fire and smoke!



Johnny got hold of the armed man's bit

BARBWIRE TALK

By BARRY SCOBEE

A LOT of people said that fat and puffing Lonnie Bole was the smartest man in Lomo Pinto County. They got a chuckle out of his smartness when he was elected sheriff and, not being the right shape and weight for easy horseback riding and posseying, named four deputies, one for each corner of the county.

More than that, he had these here new

fool talking telerphones put in for each deputy, using the barbwire fences for forty-fifty-sixty miles over the cattle ranges to talk on. So that all "Big" Bole had to do to hold down his new job was sit in the middle of his office like a spider and tell his deputies to do the buzzing around.

His further smartness was shown, so people said, in the men he picked to pin down the county corners. The 'brains of the range' they were called by the voters for the defeated candidate, with sarcastic implications.

"Me, I'm just one brain, and little brain at that," said Johnny Whitaker, who had the northwest corner, when he heard the sour-grapes talk. "A kind of taperin' off brain, 'way out here by my lonely."

Johnny had a fifteen-section ranch here in the short-grass country, a fair start for a young fellow without a wife. He had just got into the house from throwing down hay for his coming-fresh cows, in the cold March forenoon, when the talking-box on the kitchen window-facing clattered raucously.

Sheriff Bole had promised not to call in daytime, only after supper at night for a friendly confab now and then, unless something urgent hopped up. So this must be an emergency. Johnny skinned off his glove and snatched the receiver to his ear and yelled at the top of his voice into the little horn-like funnel-of-a-thing called the transmitter or transmutter or something.

"Hey, can't I ever learn yuh," came Bole's cheerful voice, "to talk natural in this durn contraption? If you going to keep yelling yuh might as well send the box back to Kansas City and open yore winda and yell across the country. It's only sixty miles."

Johnny didn't visualize Big Bole off in town sitting at his desk in his swivel chair talking calmly into his phone. Johnny hadn't become that telephone conscious, or unconscious, yet. His visualization went no farther than a little voice in a round black cylinder that he held against his ear. A tiny, funny little voice that came from nowhere.

"Say," he said, surprised, "looks like cold weather doesn't interfere with the little voice. I can hear it as plain as on a nice day."

"Listen here, cowboy, don't you call me 'the little voice'." Johnny heard his boss chuckle. "You stretch out yore imagination and envizualize me here, and quit yore listening just to that dingus in your fist. What you doin' this morning?"

"Been putting down hay for some of my cows. Shore is frost in the pitchfork handle. T'ain't soft out here like it is in town—the wind could penetrate an iron door."

"Umm—yore ride is going to be kinda chilly."

"What ride?"

"Around over yore corner."

"What for?"

"Money."

"What money?"

"Spendin' money. Some gold, and some silver, and currency. Sixteen thousand dollars worth, so they say."

"Who say?"

"Man over to Gorley."

"That's over in the next county."

"Yes, but he telephoned to me, and some of it was over slick wire, and kinda roundabout, a hundered and forty mile. Yessir, I talked a hundered and forty mile. With the Gorley banker. Plain as plain, might nigh."

"What's this all about?"

SHERIFF BOLE even at that distance showed by the tone of his voice that he was irritated.

"Quit yelling. Seems like some men robbed the bank last night. Last seen they were coming thisaway. I mean, toward yore corner of our county. That would be natural, to heist 'emselves quick out of the county of their crime. And it's natural they would come through here heading mebbe for Mexico."

"And you want me to stop them?" Johnny Whitaker demanded.

"I know it's yore first case as deputy. You get you some good help. You know what the disgruntled element is saying? That you and the other deppities is the brains of the county. So you got to show 'em, Johnny. Be the brains. I figger the robbers it would be a chance to see slantin' from the road that goes through Gorley. That will put 'em in our bailawick at about the Market Road. Get over that way quick, son. Use yore

noggin. Now go to ridin'."

The sheriff hung up in Johnny's ear. That probably meant no arguing or asking a lot of useless questions. On my own, thought Johnny.

Then he thought of something else. Old Dave Russom, and Susan Dell, lived near the Market Road. Even if he never saw the robbers it would be a chance to see her. Robbers likely would bend to the southward of the road. He'd ride in that direction.

Also he thought of something else. Two neighbors, miles away, had telephones. He called first one then the other and gave the information that bank robbers were riding through the country somewhere, seemed, and they might show up along the Market Road. He'd appreciate any help anybody would like to extend.

Then he went out and saddled his best horse, Red Fox. The icy west wind, jimmying into his clothing, told him he had better get on something warmer, so he returned to the house. His glance always slid straight to the talking box, as if it were a person or a dog. He had never taken the initiative and called the sheriff. The spirit moved him to do so now. He twirled the little crank, in three shorts and a long.

"Yeah?" said the little feller in the black guttapercha cylinder.

"Just thought I would call," said Johnny. "I'm ready to go!"

"Quit hollerin' in my ear. I thought you'd be there by now. Listen, Johnny, I forgot to tell yuh. The bank is offering a reward of five hunnerd simoleons for return of the sixteen thousand. Huh? Yeh, kinda low. But also one hunnerd apiece for the three robbers. You collect all that you could get married."

"I got plenty money to marry on, mister. What I need is something to marry."

"Listen, ever' gal in this town, from fourteen to forty, would wed with you at the least instigation. Better call Thompsons and Grangers."

"I called 'em."

"Good luck."

"I'll need it, Little Voice."

Johnny hung up before Lonnie Big Bole could cuss.

It was eleven miles to Susan Dell Russom's and no ranchhouses in between. Johnny tried to stay in valleys on the east side of hills to keep the west wind from blasting at his side. But now and then he felt he had to ride to a ridgeback for a wider look-see over the rolling land, in hope of sighting three riders who would be the fugitives.

He wondered what he would do if he found them. He'd been in a posse once that caught a pair of horse thieves. He hadn't done much of anything there. He had to admit to himself he was a little uneasy, sort of nervous maybe. He felt kind of plagued by the gun on the belt around his waist, outside his thick weather jacket. First time he had ever packed a gun to maybe kill with. Or point at somebody and say, "Tickle the moon," or something like that.

He got to feeling so bashful about it that he took the belt off and fastened the holster and gun to the saddle-horn with a thong. This little change was followed by a stare at his deputy's badge. It was big as a moon on the breast of his weather coat. He unpinned it with cold-stiff fingers and dropped it into a pocket.

In the eleven miles Johnny saw no other rider than himself. Ragged smoke was flagging from the chimney of the Russom house when he hove into sight. Nothing seemed amiss around the pens and sheds and the much-reduced haystack. He stood his good Red Fox out of the wind and yipped that he was there. But the door did not open until the porch floor sounded under his heels, and Susan Dell stood there.

"Hello, Johnny," she greeted stiffly. "Come in." Then when he had closed the door behind him: "Johnny, I want you to meet some guests of ours, Mr. Jones, Mr. Smith, Mr. Brown, and this is Mr. White."

"Howdy," said Johnny, to the hard, watching eyes and the barely nodded heads. And, "How are you today, Mr. Russom?"

"Porely, as usual. What did yuh expect?"

The old man, old before his time, sat in a rocker with a shawl around his bony shoulders. He owned four sections of land here, and everybody knew that no man on earth or in Texas could make a living on four square miles here in the short-grass country. Susan Dell had tried to

get her pa to sell out and move to town, but he was just sick-man contrary.

"Sniff-sniff, I smell dinner," said Johnny to Susan Dell. "Cabbage and pig-shanks."

"It will be ready as soon as the corn-bread browns."

"I didn't see any strange horses," Johnny told her.

"They're in the barn," she said, and added: "Getting a grain feed."

"Ho," said Johnny, "using the last of yore chicken and cow-feed, uh?"

"Does it weigh any on you?" asked the man with the Jones designation.

"Yeh," said Johnny, and made a pleasant grin at the four. "How's bank robbin'?"

The room was so shocked-still that the purr of the wind outside on roof and walls seemed to insulate the place, and muffle it.

"Where's the loot?" Johnny asked the four faces holding on to him as if he were a magnet.

"The loot?" murmured Jones.

"The sixteen thousand bucks, in gold and silver and greenbacks, from the bank at Gorley?"

The man Smith, so-called, gave his lips a quick lick and asked: "How'd you find it out, 'way down here?"

And from Jones: "You from Gorley? You foller us?"

"I live here," said Johnny. "Eleven miles from here."

"He's the deputy sheriff," said Susan Dell, kind of proud, Johnny thought and hoped.

JOHNNY drew his badge from his pocket and cupped it at them in his palm, so they could see. Its brightness seemed to smirk and leer at them.

"Well-well," said Jones, "a deppity adds a little salt and seasonin' to our peradventure, don't it, bruthern? Will we eat him now or save him f'r supper on the road?"

"How'd yuh find it out?" Smith insisted. "Way out here?"

"You're a persistent character," Johnny commented. "Got the news by telephone."

Three of the four heaved to their feet.

"Telephome?" Jones burst out. "Aint one o' them telephomes here?"

"They're around over the country," said Johnny.

"You're lying. Ain't no poles and wires."

"Barbwire talk," said Johnny. "The sheriff says it marks the end o' crime. News gets around faster'n robbers on horses. You want to hand me the loot?"

The three sat down. Jones said: "You're kinda green, ain't yuh?"

"But what chance have yuh got?" Johnny argued. "The news got here soon as you did. Better throw yoreselves on the mercy of the court by handing me the cash."

"Let's take to ridin', quick!" said Smith.

"No!" spoke up the youngest of the four, a youth who looked no more than eighteen or twenty. "My hoss is too jaded."

"You're in it neck-deep, kid," said the bullying Jones. "Pen f'r you same as us, git ketched. Buckle yore tongue. You, Sis," to Susan Dell, "how's that corn-pone?"

"I'll see," she said and flitted to the kitchen.

"Ill help her get the table loaded," said Johnny, and started to. Jones and Smith and Brown were on their feet in a flash with short guns in their fists.

"Jes' spike yore tootsies to the floor, feller," said Jones. "Go frisk him, Brownie."

The slim man tagged Brown stepped behind Johnny and proceeded to search him with the efficiency of a police turn-key. Johnny had read about such men. At the last he came up with Johnny's bright badge, and sneered at it, and flicked it into the hot fireplace.

"I al'ays did hate a blasted law," he said, and without the slightest warning he slugged Johnny in the face.

Johnny staggered into a chair and tripped and sat down hard on the floor. Brown kicked at him viciously. Johnny dodged, and grabbed the shoe by the heel and toe and twisted. Brown's other foot left the floor. His body turned. He hit the floor on his front, all spraddled out. It jarred the whole house. He clawed for his gun, mouthing curses. Jones kicked it out of his hand.

"I'll do the man-shooting," he said.

"Dinner is ready," Susan Dell announced from the kitchen door.

Her cheeks were flaming red—adding to her dark good looks—whether from stove heat, general resentment, or the excitement of the squabble. The man Smith, or Hake, and the youngster moved toward the kitchen like hungry hounds.

"Hold it!" Jones ordered. "Hake and I will take a look outside first. Might be other riders coming in. You Brownie, get up and keep this law peacable while we're gone."

"No!" It was Susan Dell. "Leave that gun-crazy here with John. He'd shoot him down."

"Right," said Johnny, who with Brown had got to his feet. "I'll go with you, Jones and Smith."

He opened the door willy nilly, and in a moment everybody was in the yard but old Mr. Russom. They all combed the windy landscape, and no other rider was visible.

"Now while we're all out here," said Susan Dell, "you men can throw some hay to our two milk cows and the horse. I'll go get dinner on the table."

"Not by yoreself you won't," said Jones. "Hake, you and me will go with her and see what she uses for seasoning. Brownie, you stay here. Kid, you help the law pitch the hay."

The hay was some little distance from the pen and sheds. The stack was used down until only two feet or so of it was left. It didn't take much hay for three or four animals in this mild Southwestern country. There was only one fork. Johnny loosened the hay and had the kid carry it in his arms. And Johnny lugged great forkfuls across to the pen. Once the kid whispered to Johnny, behind an armload of fragrant hay:

"I'm no bank robber. I live in Gorley."

"Say, you," Brown interrupted, "you've got about enough hay moved. Let's go."

"What does a poolhall bum like you know about hay for animals?" Johnny retorted. "I'll tell yuh when there's enough."

For Johnny was getting a plan in mind. It included giving the stock enough hay to last three or four days. He kept on, working fast against Brown completely losing patience. He hurried the youth, too.

"I'm not going to miss that hash," Brown warned presently. "Come on."

"All set," said Johnny. "Guess that'll be enough. Let me put the fork back."

He started back toward the stack, fumbling in a pocket. "Drop that fork," Brown commanded. "Right wher' you are."

"Shore," said Johnny, and dropped the fork, and almost in the same motion he struck a match across his sole and tossed it into the loose scattered hay.

A blaze started up instantly. The wind sent the blazing loose stuff sliding toward, and into, the stack. He heard Brown running up from behind.

"What'd yuh do that for?" Brown sang out excitedly.

"For the girl's sake," said Johnny quietly, facing around to the nervous fellow.

"She want it burned?"

"She has tried and tried to get her sick father to sell out and move to town. If they're out of hay for their stock they'll have to do something. Mebbe the old man will give in. Listen, Brown, don't say anything in the house about this fire, it might make her spoil the dinner.

"Smartest idee I ever heard from the law. Git goin', ahead!"

Johnny gave a final look around. The ground was bare between the stack and everything else. The wind had swept all loose straw back against the stack. And the whole circle of hay was flaming furiously, boiling up thick yellowish smoke that would string out in a gray cloud for a mile or two across the rangeland, over the rolling hills. Satisfied, Johnny preceded the guard to the house. The youth fell in beside him, and Johnny asked him to say nothing about the fire to the people in the house. The wind was covering its roar.

DINNER was on the table when the three entered. The old pendulum clock on the wall was striking twelve. Jones put himself at the head of the table and Johnny at the other end, and put Mr. Russom and the girl on either side of him, and the youth between those three and his own two men, well out of reach of guns.

Pretty soon Johnny started up some talk. "How'd you happen to be with these bank robbers, kid?"

"I'd been to see my girl," the boy said, quick as a spark. "I rode into 'em just leaving the bank."

"Go ahead and talk," said Jones. "It don't matter now."

"They brought me along," said the boy, "to keep me from giving the alarm."

"Which," said the man called Smith, or Hake, "proves it don't pay to have no truck with wimmen."

"Where's the loot?" Johnny asked the youngster.

"In their saddle-pockets. The pockets are on the saddles. The saddles are on their hosses. Their hosses are in the barn."

"When we ride from here," said Jones, "you ride with us, Mr. Law."

"Why?" Susan Dell asked. "I can tell our neighbors you robbers are in this vicinity the same as he could."

"But you wouldn't likely ride after us and cause some shooting. The kid goes along too."

"How far?" asked the boy, concerned. "My folks are going to be worried." Nobody took time off from knife-and-fork to answer that. Naturally it was problematical anyhow.

"If yuh figger on shooting us to hush our mouths—" the kid started again.

"Yuh gab too much," said Smith.

And that put the quietus on conversation for some time. The old clock on the wall behind Johnny chimed the half-hour. The robbers began to get filled up with food but they turned out to be prodigious coffee drinkers. Susan Dell had to put on another pot. After that the men began to lean back, and sup coffee, and smoke cigarettes, and pick off a choice bit of lean hog-shank now and then, luxuriating in the kitchen's warmth and the satisfaction of filled stomachs.

"How far to the county seat?" asked Jones at last.

"Around sixty miles," said Johnny. "You can take the Market Road—called that because it's the main cattle drive to the railroad. Or yuh can cross that road couple miles south of here and keep on to Mexico, if yuh want to go that far."

"Mebbe yuh could guide us, uh? As yuh ride along with us."

We haven't started yet, Johnny thought, as he remembered his six-gun in the holster thonged to his saddle-horn. It was out there on Red Fox standing in the lee of the house out of the wind. That gun could sure come in handy now, without it being showoff.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, the old family clock stepping off time. Brown nodding a little in his chair—the poolhall bum, the unthinking town feller, who hadn't realized why Johnny had set the hay on fire. Old Mr. Russom got fidgety with wanting to return to his rocking chair and the shawl over his shoulders and Jones told him sharply to sit still.

"It's warmer in here," he added, "than in yore living room. Hake, mebbe you'd better go out and take a look-see."

Just then the clock struck one, and Mr. Russom said sharply, startled, "I smell smoke. Smells like hay."

"So do I!" said Jones, just as sharply. He ran into the living room and looked from the window toward the pens. "The haystack is on fire!" he yelled.

Everyone stampeded for the living room. Johnny saw with satisfaction a wind-ragged drift of smoke lying over the level country and the low hills for two miles or more.

"You set that?" Jones ground out at him.

"Yes," said Johnny.

"You let him?" Jones shot at Brown, viciously. "You blasted town fool!"

"But he said—he said—"

"And you didn't have sense enough to know all the neighbors for ten miles around would see it and come a-ridin'?"

"For twelve or fifteen miles," said Johnny. "They'll think Mr. Russom's house is burning. You're done for, Jones. All of yuh. Might as well lay down yore guns."

The seven people in that room stood held in silence by the meaning of it all. A slow hateful fury built up in Jones and Smith and Brown—or whatever their real names might be. The look of men trapped was on their faces. Smith's, or Hake's, hand was on his gun and his eyes were on Johnny.

"You burned my hay, John Whitaker?" old man Russom asked slowly. "You—"

"Five hundred dollars reward is offered for the return of the money, Mr. Russom," said Johnny. "Three hundred for the three robbers. You can have it all, for the mebbe forty dollars worth of hay

I set on fire."

"Listen, you law," Jones broke in, "get out of the house. You'll ride with us. You'll be our ransom—our ticket to escape, if the range gets crowded. Out, now!"

It suited Johnny, providing he could get to his horse and the gun on the saddle. He got to the horse all right, but the holster was empty. He must have shown his chagrin, for Jones, at his heels, snickered grimly:

"Think I'm plumb pure fool?" Jones snarled. "I've got yore iron. Lead yore horse to the stable."

The three robbers quickly led out their mounts, with the saddles still on. They were paying no more attention to the boy from Gorley. Their thoughts were fully on themselves, on their predicament, on getting away. They watched Johnny every instant. They scanned the rolling hills and ridges.

Susan Dell came to the pens. She gave the smoking hay a look, and gave Johnny a look, and her eyes were dancing.

"It's been burning more than an hour," he said.

"I figured," she said, and looked east and south, the directions in which the nearest neighbors lived.

"Get up," Jones ordered Johnny, and Johnny lifted to his saddle.

They headed southeast, which would be the shortest route to the Mexican Border. They rode hard, though the horses were stiff from an all night's riding. A half mile from the house they mounted up a slope, Jones ordered a halt, while he went on far enough to peep over the ridge. He came tearing back.

"Three riders already!" he said. "We've got to dodge 'em."

He led to their left, keeping behind the crown of the ridge. A quarter of a mile eastward and they reached the break in the ridge, and were about to start through when four riders appeared.

"This way!" Jones ordered, and went spurring back toward the house, due west.

BEFORE they got back to the Russoms' a lone rider appeared from the southwest, and two men from due north. The latter, Johnny knew, were the Grangers, father and son, whose ranch he had called on the phone. They would be armed even if the others, who had been summoned by sight of the smoke, weren't.

Jones and the other two held straight for the west, riding fast past the Russom buildings. Their every thought now, and every move, was intent upon escape, with the fear of fugitives riding their backs. They held roughly in triangle form with Johnny in their center, and each man had a six-gun gripped and ready if Johnny tried for a break.

Then four riders seemed to bounce on to the hill northwest. The Thompsons, also whom Johnny had phoned. Two Thompson men and their two Mexican hands, and they had rifles. They were firing almost as soon as they caught sight of the robbers. Johnny waved his hat. Hake-Smith slugged him on one shoulder with his pistol. More bullets came, spattering the ground aroundabout, in warning.

One of the Thompsons and one of the Mexicans began to ride the ridge south, to cut off the robbers from the straight-west course.

"Jep!" Brown sort of squealed, pawing at Jones' arm. "Look! We're surrounded. Anyhow fifteen men!" Jones slapped the pawing hand away. Johnny jumped his horse between the two.

"You fool!" he bawled. "You think you can get away now?"

"We'll be shot to ribbons!" Brown howled.

Johnny pawed for and got hold of Jones' bridle-bit. "Pull up!" he yelled, and he dragged the horse around to a stop. Jones struck out with his gun, and it knocked Johnny's hat awry.

Hake-Smith fired two wild shots, and then the Thompsons and their Mexicans were coming and yelling like wild Indians.

"You men might's well give up," said Johnny quietly. "Good place is back to the house. You shoot now and you'll be mowed down. Come with me and I'll see you're treated fairly."

"It'll be the pen!" wailed Brown.

"I ain't quittin'!" Hake-Smith snarled and lifted his gun.

"Fool!" Jones chopped Smith's wrist with the edge of his hand, and knocked the six-gun to the ground. "You'll get

us all killed, Hake. Blast it, turn in the loot and we'll get off light—if we don't kill somebody."

Johnny whirled his horse and rode hard for the buildings. He could hear the robbers pounding along close behind. When he reached the pens, other men rode up. Johnny faced the robbers.

"Better shuck yore guns," he said, and when the sullen trio had tossed their revolvers to the dusty ground, and had pitched Johnny's gun to him: "Now I'll pass a gunnysack," said Johnny, "and you can donate yore divvies of loot from your saddlepockets, and no holding back."

Most of the men were unarmed, and were looking on in amazement, knowing nothing about bank robbers. One murmured that all he came for was to help put out the fire he supposed was burning Uncle Dave Russom's house. But when the Thompsons and the Grangers came pounding in, they all had rifles and some had six-guns too.

"How come?" Jones asked, sore and bedeviled in his soul at the turn of affairs. "How'd you fellers know to bristle yoreselves with guns?"

"Barbwire talk," said Old Man Thompson. "Johnny to us. Handy, them talking boxes. Puts an end to crime."

"Ha-ha," said Jones drily.

"Hey," shouted Mr. Russom, coming up with a bed quilt around him, "you burned all my hay, John Whitaker."

"That'll give you a good excuse to sell out and go to town, Mr. Russom," said Johnny.

"Susan Dell can't live in a fool hotel in town," the old man shouted testily. "What'd become o' Susan Dell?"

"Well," said Johnny, "she—I—we—" The men around began to grin. It made Johnny burst right out: "I'd marry her in a minute if—if she'd be willing."

"Good gosh," said Mr. Russom in relief, "why ain't yuh said so all these months?"

"I—I was plain afraid to risk it," said Johnny. "She—doggone it, Susan Dell, I'm proposin'."

"You've got nothing on me," said Susan Dell, her eyes dancing. "I'm accepting."

"Barbwire talk," murmured Jones. "Whitaker, I hope she crowns yuh onct a day with a stovelid. Here's the durn money and we're askin' mercy."

Ride 'em, Cowboy!

THE cowboy's saddle was designed neither for racing nor jumping. It was too heavy for racing, averaging about forty pounds, and the cowpony was not meant to be a race horse. He was trained to cover long distances at the most economical pace, which was the running walk, the lope, or the trot. Occasionally he was asked to make a short, swift dash after a cow with independent ideas and for this purpose the quarter horse was unmatched, being extraordinarily nimble.

As for jumping, the saddle was too big and designed all wrong. A cavalry saddle was made small enough so that the rider could cling even when he rose into the "take-off" position. But in a cowboy's rocking-chair saddle, the moment he did so, he was off-balance and his ability to stay aboard was reduced. On the prairie, there were few occasions where jumping was necessary.

The cowboy's saddle was designed with specific purposes in mind. It was ideal for roping. It made riding bucking broncs possible. And it was comfortable enough to sleep in on a long trip. —*Tex Mumford.*

"Any particular place you'd like to go?" Syd asked

A Sandy-Haired Mischief

By STEPHEN PAYNE

When Hope tries to stop her brother from going silly over a girl, she promptly goes foolish herself—over a stranger!

HOPE CLAYMORE had stabled her saddle pony and had visited the Saddlerock Bakery before her slim-booted feet carried her into the office of Jack Dawson, Realtor.

"Jack," she began at once, "I want you to find a buyer for Boyd Lambert's Two L outfit." Then her gaze went past the bald and plump real estate man. "Excuse me. I didn't notice that you had company."

Her hazel eyes rested on the sturdy, sun-leathered young man who had risen expectantly to his feet, an anticipatory smile on his wide lips and a pronounced twinkle in his admiring blue eyes.

"That's all right, Hope," Jack Dawson, who had also come to his feet, said hastily. "Miss Claymore, this is Mr. Sanderson. Syd Sanderson."

Syd bowed and made a move to seize her hand. But she ignored the gesture, and responded with a cool:

"How do you do?"

Dawson broke the moment of silence which followed.

"What is this, Hope? Lambert hasn't said anything to me about selling."

"He doesn't know yet! It's all my idea."

Hope turned abruptly and went out. Syd was suddenly beside her, hat set at a jaunty angle on his sandy hair.

"Can't I see you home, Miss Claymore," he asked.

She stopped and said pointedly, "I met you only about sixty seconds ago. Besides, I haven't any home!"

"Then we have something in common. We're both foot-loose."

"I didn't mean—" Hope was suddenly confused. "That is, I have a place to stay, for I've got a job at the Saddlerock Bakery. I'm going there now, and you—you're going on about your business, if you have any."

The twinkle in his eyes—nice eyes, Hope admitted, and he was really a well-set-up fellow—became more evident.

"Don't kid me, Hope," he said in a gentle drawl. "I had my squinters on you the minute you rode that dun pony into town, and right away I pumped friend Dawson."

"And men say women are the gossips! Well, good-by."

Hope started along the creaking plank sidewalk. The cowboy kept pace with her, boot heels clicking.

"I've just decided to buy dozens of cakes and pies," he declared solemnly.

Provoked though she was, Hope could not help laughing. Thereupon he proceeded:

"I own a sleek bay horse, and you have a dun. What's to stop us from taking a ride at sundown?"

FOR a definitive private reason of her own, Hope did want to ride out to her brother's Bar C Ranch this very evening.

"I'll think about it, Mr. Sanderson," she temporized. "Here's the bakery. I'd rather you didn't come in."

"Okay," he said cheerfully. "Be seeing you this evening. What time, Hope?"

"Make it five o'clock."

Hope darted into the Saddlerock Bakery and closed its doors behind her with a definite click. Mrs. Frewin and her daughter Ada were in the rear part of the cottage which was both home and business establishment, so they had not yet seen Hope's newly acquired shadow.

Odd that her pulses were racing when she knew she must not think twice about a mischievous, drifting saddle-pounder. Nonetheless, Hope looked through the window and saw Syd sauntering across the street to enter the Saddlerock Hotel.

Geraldine Powers had a room at the hotel, and Geraldine was someone about whom Hope couldn't think calmly. For that young woman—darn her come-hither violet eyes and her sleek, slinky figure! — had Hope's brother Dick going around in circles. Which was one reason Hope had left Dick Claymore's Bar C Ranch.

Another reason for Hope's taking a town job was to get away from Boyd Lambert. Boyd lived on the adjoining ranch, but put in most of his time visiting Hope on the Bar C.

"Things are working out swell for us, Hope," he had told her yesterday evening. "Just as soon as your brother Dick ties up with the lovely Geraldine, he'll be wanting to sell out, for that dressy dame isn't going to settle down on any two-bit ranch. Okay, say I. Let Dick get out and spread his wings with her. I'll buy his outfit, and you and me, honey, will be settin' pretty."

Hope had not troubled to tell Boyd she was developing some deep schemes of her own. She must break up her brother's infatuation for Geraldine, and she must also bring Dick and Ada Frewin together once again. Ada and Dick could be wonderfully happy there on Bac C—if Boyd Lambert was removed from the picture.

Miss Geraldine Powers must also be persuaded or compelled to leave Saddlerock. Hope had heard that the troublesome charmer had come here to visit the banker's wife, and when she found Mrs. Blount absent, she had settled down in the hotel for an indefinite stay. It sounded unreasonable to Hope, who could see no logical reason for a woman like Geraldine to stay in a town which to her must be stupidly dull. What, then, was her game?

Promptly at five o'clock Syd Sanderson, leading Hope's dun, reined his bay horse to a stop in front of the bakery. Hope had the uncomfortable feeling that the town was watching with avid curiosity as she rode away with this stranger. But of course she could do nothing about it. They rode out on the south road.

"Any particular place you'd like to go?" Syd asked, surveying her with admiring eyes and a half-amused grin.

"Yes. To the Bar C. We'll cut across country and sort of steal up on the ranch buildings unseen."

"Just why are we going to coyote to these buildings? Or don't I merit your confidence, Lovely?"

"'Lovely'! You're the freshest—Seriously, Syd, I'm trying to stop my brother from making a fool of himself. Dick's all right, you understand, only —" She broke off and sighed.

"Only," said the cowboy, "he's as silly as most men when a girl with a pair of melting eyes and a dreamy voice and plenty of oomph turns her miracle smile on him."

Hope's eyebrows went up.

"How'd you know?" she demanded sharply. "Oh, I guess Jack Dawson told you what's going on."

He nodded, tugged down his hat brim in front. "I'm a sympathetic cuss, and for once I want to be helpful," he remarked. "If I didn't, I might throw monkey wrenches into the deal and stand off and chortle. On my home range they say I'm a practical joker—when they aren't saying things less complimentary."

HOPE couldn't help laughing at his droll expression. He possessed an unusually mobile face. She suspected that as a kid he had been a little imp, and he hadn't entirely outgrown it either.

"This isn't exactly a prank," she said. "My brother loves good food, and when he comes in from work this evening he's going to be surprised and jolted that I'm not on hand with a bang-up supper for him as usual."

"Umphm? He's been taking you for granted, and you allow that rustling his own chuck will jolt him?"

"I had thought that while cooking his own meals he'd get to thinking that Geraldine couldn't be expected to soil her hands working around a kitchen. But when I talked to Ada about it, we had a better idea. She agreed to go and get supper for him. Ada is sympathetic and motherly and comforting to have around. Now, enjoying that meal together, how can they help getting chummy?"

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed," said Syd, holding aloft both hands and chuckling. "By the way, Dawson was flabbergasted when you commanded him to find a buyer for Lambert's spread. Now that I'm partly in your confidence, I'd like to know why?"

"Frankly," Hope interrupted, "I just thought if a buyer were to pop up and make an offer, he might think about it. Any suggestions, Syd?"

The cowboy kicked his left foot out of the stirrup, threw his foot and leg up over the saddle-horn and sat sideward in his saddle, regarding Hope thoughtfully.

"When I meet the gentleman and size him up I'll know better how to handle him," he said. "D'you suppose that he might fall for this gorgeous dame?"

"Never!" returned Hope with emphasis. "Lambert boasts that no girl can vamp him. So you see that idea's out, cowboy."

They reached the Bar C, and rode into the willows that bordered the creek to leave their horses there. Syd swung off instantly and stepped toward the other horse to help Hope, although she was too skillful a horsewoman to need help.

She had guessed his strength, but it

was good to feel it as his arms closed around her. An instant later she was on her feet. But there was something heady in their nearness, and Syd's arms did not loose their hold. A light flashed in his eyes, and his lips met hers and held them in a long, hard kiss.

"Gosh, but you're wonderful, Hope," he breathed. "And this was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. I can't say I'm sorry, but please forgive me."

Something that was a mingling of anger and delight had surged through the girl at the touch of those lips on hers. And since she couldn't make up her mind whether or not to let anger or happiness win, she merely pulled away.

"It wasn't for this that I agreed to ride with you this evening, Syd Sanderson," she said coolly. "If you can behave yourself now, you can come with me. If not, ride back alone."

"I'll be good, if you'll not tempt me again."

Syd grinned, and on foot they stole as cautiously as thieves to the far side of the small ranchhouse. Hope was tingling with excitement and anticipation, Syd's eyes were dancing as they lifted their heads to a window and looked into the kitchen-dining room.

There at the table sat Boyd Lambert, and across from him sat plump, blond Ada Frewin. No one else was present.

Hope's deflated gasp was audible to Syd.

"You're disappointed," he whispered. "Is that man Boyd Lambert?"

She nodded and felt tears of hot vexation burn in her eyes.

"Everything's haywire," she choked.

"Ada," they heard Lambert saying, "it was mighty fine of you to get this swell feed for me."

"I supposed Dick would come in from work," the blond girl returned. "Where is he?"

"Dick headed for town long before you come out here. Had the team and buggy, and was he all dressed up—with some place to go! Ha-ha! You say Hope's in town and takin' a job with your ma? What got into her? Not that I'm missin' her much this evenin', Ada. You're enough for me."

Hope Claymore put her hand on Syd's arm.

"Let's go. And, oh, am I blue and discouraged!"

SHE was feeling no better the following morning when she was awakened in her new quarters by kindly Mrs. Frewin, who assigned her the duty of waiting upon customers until she learned more about other phases of the business.

Late the previous evening, Ada, escorted by Boyd Lambert, had returned home. But the two girls had not yet compared notes on their plot when Hope's brother walked into the bakery.

Dick Claymore possessed none of Hope's verve and dash. But he was a straightforward, thrifty fellow who until recently had shown plenty of hard common sense. In fact, his extreme thrift—which he called business sense—had often annoyed Hope.

She owned no part of the Bar C, and had worked for three years as her brother's housekeeper and cook, without any increase in salary. Long before this she could have done much better financially elsewhere, had she not considered it her duty to look after Dick.

This morning Dick was still wearing his dress-up clothes, and Hope, with a sister's quick eyes, noted his wilted collar and his sleep-hungry eyes.

"What did you mean by pulling out and leaving me, sis?" he demanded, as if she had done him a great wrong.

Hope looked at him steadily.

"Where were you last night, Dick?"

He flushed. "I drove over to Sidlow. There's lot more doing in that good-sized town than there is in this two-bit burg."

"Oh! Geraldine liked it, and you had fun?"

"Sure did!" Dick looked around as if fearing they would be overheard, and then in a low, thrilled voice he said, "We'll be engaged when I give her a real diamond ring. We almost quarreled about it, but I gave in. Hope, Gerry wants a five-hundred-dollar diamond! I didn't imagine— But it's all right. Sis, lend me the money, won't you?"

No one could have blamed Hope for the sort of wicked pleasure and satisfaction which ran through her. If Dick couldn't raise the money, he wouldn't buy the diamond, and then Geraldine would drop her brother so hard he would bounce!

She looked Dick straight in the eyes.

"No!" she declared. "I won't put up ten cents for you to throw away on a diamond for that flirt."

The young man's neck and ears turned crimson.

"You—" he began.

Suddenly someone moved toward them from the open doorway. It was Syd Sanderson, beaming first at Hope, then at Dick.

"This is your brother, Hope, I'll bet two dollars," he remarked jovially, grasped Dick's hand, and pumped it. "What was this I overheard about a diamond? You can talk freely to me, Dick, for Hope and I are old pals."

Hope's eyes went frosty. Did this irrepressible cowpuncher think that because he had kissed her while on one horseback ride he was an "old pal"?

"I don't care who knows it," Dick blurted, still flushed and uncomfortable. "I'm going to give Gerry a diamond."

Syd clapped him on the back. "That's great, Dick. It happens that I've got just the ring. It's a honey, a five-hundred-dollar stone."

He fished a ring from his pocket, and twisted it so the sun rays through the window brought out the sparkle of a fine blue diamond in a platinum setting.

"You—you're sure it's worth all that dough?" Dick asked breathlessly.

"We'll get it appraised, if you're interested, Dick."

"I sure am! Only, I've got no money."

"Don't let that worry you, Dick." Syd glanced at Hope, and his eyes were dancing like the sunlight on the big diamond. "I'll accept your IOU. Let's amble along."

After the two men had gone, Ada Frewin came from the back rooms of the establishment and reported the dismal backfiring of her scheme and Hope's at the Bar C.

"Oh, Hope, what shall we try next?"

Hope shook her head and sighed.

"I feel as if I'd been wrung through a wringer. I can't even think straight."

She was unprepared for the appearance of Mr. Boyd Lambert, who strutted importantly into the bakery at approximately eleven o'clock.

"How are you, Hope, old kid, old kid?"

"Don't you 'old kid' me!" she flared. "Just go away."

"I suppose you're upset because Dick's ready to sell me the Bar C. But you'll get over it, my dear girl."

"I hadn't heard about that!" Hope cried, dismayed. "I don't believe it, either!"

"It's the truth! Things are breakin' just like I said they might. Although there's still one little catch."

HOPE walked with wooden feet over to the window and looked out. At the Saddlerock Hotel she saw Syd Sanderson on the porch conversing with—of all people—her pet aversion, Miss Geraldine Powers.

"He knows Geraldine!" she thought. "He knows her well. And he's playing her game! By accepting my brother's IOU, Syd's deliberately encouraged Dick to spend his money foolishly. It wasn't mere coincidence that he had that diamond ring in his pocket."

"I'm glad there's one little catch," she remarked to Boyd Lambert, over her shoulder. "What is it?"

"Blast it! I can't raise the money. I tried old man Blount at the bank, of course." Lambert snapped his fingers. "But Blount ain't got the business sense of a mule."

"He's as stubborn as a mule, thank goodness," said Hope with sudden elation. "He probably reminded you your Two L is already plastered for as much as it's worth, and that you haven't shown any great desire to work off that debt."

Again Lambert snapped his fingers. This time derisively.

"Women don't know anything about business, Hope. A smart man hires hands to do the hard work while he manages— Oh, hello, Dawson."

The realtor had thrust his head into

the room. "I hear your wanting to dispose of the Two L, Boyd," he said.

"I'm *what?*" Lambert ejaculated. "Well, it's the first I'd heard of it. On the contrary, I'm plannin' to expand. Who told you, Jack?"

Jaunty, devil-may-care Syd Sanderson pushed past Dawson, with a broad wink at Hope—which she did not understand—he plunged at once into the conversation.

"Lambert, I'm Syd Sanderson. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you yet, but I know who you are—the best darned cowman and rancher in this neck of the woods."

Hope felt that Syd was razzing the man, yet from the tone of his voice and the gravity of his expression, Lambert might assume that he was both sincere and serious. Dawson, however, was having difficulty in keeping a straight face.

"I used to know Jack Dawson," Syd went on, "So I looked him up when I hit this town. And then I found another person here I already knew—Miss Geraldine Powers."

Lambert lifted his dark eyebrows and opened his mouth to speak. But Jack Dawson put in quickly:

"If that's the case, Syd, perhaps you can tell me why she is here."

Feeling out of this, Hope began to arrange a display of cookies and coffee cakes. What was that sandy-haired prankster up to now?

"You might not believe it, Jack, but Geraldine may be looking for safe investments that yield higher interest rates than stocks and bonds," Syd drawled.

Lambert eyed the indolent cowpuncher with sharp interest.

"She's got money?" he asked.

Syd shrugged. "I was considering asking her to stake me to buy a little cow outfit."

"That's a laugh, Syd," Jack Dawson put in, and he laughed jovially. "You'll never plant your fiddle feet."

The cowboy drew his hands out of his pockets, flipped a half dollar to the ceiling, and caught it.

"On the level, Jack," he returned gravely, "young Dick Claymore was talking sale to me and I promised to look at his Bar C spread. I'd better be doing that, too. Can you go along, Hope?"

"I have a job," said Hope, short and taut.

But Syd completely ignored both her tone and the coolness of her eyes.

"Be seeing you later," he said, and walked out whistling.

Boyd Lambert also left the bakery. He hesitated a few seconds when he reached the sidewalk, then crossed the street to the hotel.

Jack Dawson had lingered.

"Quite a fellow, this Syd Sanderson," he remarked, smiling at troubled Hope.

"Is he? I wish he'd never come here, and I never want to see him again!"

Hope turned and fled to her own room.

THE afternoon shadows were long, and Hope was waiting on the evening rush of bakery customers when, through the open door, she saw Boyd Lambert, with a livery team and buggy, pick up Geraldine at the hotel and drive out of town on the road to Sidlow.

Strange behavior, Hope thought, on the part of a girl engaged to her brother. She kept looking for Dick to put in his appearance, but he did not come to town, nor did she see Syd Sanderson.

After the bakery closed at nine, she called on Ernest Blount at his cottage, and came right to the point.

"Does Geraldine Powers have money?" she asked.

"I understand that her folks left her a neat sum," the banker said.

"She really is a friend of Mrs. Blount's?" Hope persisted. "She did come here to visit your wife?"

For some reason Blount's shrewd face turned red.

"Miss Claymore, I'm sorry, but I'd rather not say anything at all about Geraldine Powers."

He opened the door and bowed Hope toward it. Hope could do no less than take the broad hint.

"I think, in fact, I'm almost sure," she mused on her way back to her living quarters, "that Mrs. Blount doesn't even know that woman. To give a rea-

son for her coming to Saddlerock, Geraldine spread the rumor she was to visit the banker's wife, knowing she was not at home. Is this a mess!"

Later, she talked things over with Ada Frewin, and the two heartsick girls agreed that even though matters were out of their control before Syd Sanderson had come, they were now ten times worse. That mischievous, meddling fellow had wrecked such hopes as they had cherished.

Another day. A bright sun in a cloudless sky smiled down on Saddlerock as if the world were a beautiful, restful place and its inhabitants all pleasant people, honest and sincere. Hope went about her duties listlessly, stopping often to go to the door and look up and down the street as if expecting someone.

Eventually a lithe, sandy-haired rider on a bay horse materialized. He draped his bridle reins over a convenient hitch-rail and sauntered toward the bakery.

Hope thought of running away and refusing to face him, for her heart was pounding and her nerves were a-tingle. She was furious with herself because she wasn't as angry with him as she should be, because she was actually glad to see the "sandy-haired imp."

"'Morning, Lovely," he said, lifting his hat and smiling.

"Where were you last night?" Hope demanded.

This was not what she had intended to say, but the words rushed out involuntarily.

"At the Bar C, riding close herd on brother Dick."

The statement was so surprising that Hope had taken three impulsive steps toward Syd when the expression which lighted his mobile features made her breath catch in her throat, her heart pound madly in near-panic.

Without apparently noticing that she had stopped, Syd covered the few intervening steps. Seizing her two hands in one of his, he tipped up her pretty chin. His dancing eyes held hers.

"When I might have been enjoying the company of his lovely sister?" he finished meaningly. "Perhaps it was a great mistake. But it wasn't my own desire, Lovely. I'd rather be with you than be anywhere in the world."

His head bent down toward hers, his purpose plain. But this was too public a place for a kiss. Quite different from the dim solitude of the willows on the Bar C. With a swift movement, Hope pulled away.

"Why were you riding herd on my brother?" she asked.

With a shrug, Syd dropped his hands, although his eyes still rested hungrily on Hope's sweet flushed face.

"Dick figured he should spend the evening with Geraldine. I had to use more tricks than a magician to keep him at home. But I did it. Incidentally, Jack Dawson's now holding your brother away from the hotel until the right time comes."

"But you staked Dick to buy that ring! Why then should you want to keep him at home?"

"I figure Dick needs a sledgehammer jolt to open his eyes."

Syd shoved his right hand into his overalls pocket and brought out a familiar-looking ring.

"Is—is that the same ring?" Hope heard her surprised voice ask.

"Shu! This is a secret. It's the same ring. I figured to sell it again! And yonder, coming out of the jewelry store, is the man I hope to sell it to."

FOLLOWING the line of his gaze, Hope saw Boyd Lambert walking toward the bakery. Syd bent toward her, lowering his voice.

"Lovely, slip over to the hotel. Try not to be seen, and hide in what they call the parlor. Do it soon. Hi, Lambert! Swelligant to meet you again. Did you have any luck with—"

Boyd Lambert, looking both pleased and smug, yet at the same time decidedly worried, cut in.

"Can I see you alone a minute, Syd?"

"Sure."

Syd winked at Hope and she stepped back into the bakery and closed the door, all but a crack. Surely no one could wonder at her staying to listen.

Lambert gripped Syd's right arm.

"Old man," he remarked confidentially, "I made out fine with Geraldine.

Until yesterday she hadn't met up with a man of my standing and caliber. I sort of swept her off her feet, I reckon, and before I realized it we were engaged. Yes, it does seem sudden. Now I'm looking for a diamond halfway good enough for her and there isn't one in this jerkwater town. But the jeweler said that yesterday you had a ring that was a dinger. Still got it?"

Syd nodded and produced the jewel.

"I sort of inherited this, Lambert. Figured maybe to use it some day, myself. But to help you out I'll forget about that."

Lambert hooked his arm in Syd's, and the two walked rapidly to the one and only jewelry store. Excited and curious, Hope crossed the street to the hotel, and after making sure no one was watching her, she moved in behind an old horsehair sofa in the parlor.

Quite soon she heard the swish of silk and, peeking cautiously around the sofa, she saw Geraldine Powers. Even at this early hour, Geraldine was dressed for conquest, and she was obviously waiting for someone.

Rather noisily that someone entered. Tall, brown-mustached Boyd Lambert.

"Gerry darling, look!"

He was holding out the diamond ring, and Geraldine moved close to him and lifted her face rapturously to his.

"Oh, Boyd! Here, slip it on my finger, and kiss me!"

A strident and furious voice at the door interrupted this touching scene.

"What the dickens!"

Hope's head bobbed up as if she were a jack-in-the-box. It was her brother Dick who had spoken and, crowding at the door behind him, were a half-dozen of Saddlerock's male citizens.

"Look at our Boyd Lambert!" one of them shouted in a jeering tone. "*He* couldn't be vamped or played for a sucker! Oh, no! Not him."

Geraldine Powers broke into laughter, but Lambert wheeled and faced the men with fury darkening his face.

"Get out of here, and stay out, all of you!"

"Get out, nothin'," flared Dick Claymore. "Gerry, what does all this mean? You were wearing *my* ring."

"*Your* ring?" Lambert snapped. "Geraldine and I, we're—we're—"

He stopped and swallowed hard, as if a sudden frightening thought had hit him with terrific impact. Geraldine finished the sentence for him.

"Boyd and I are engaged," she said sweetly. "Dickie boy, I'm sorry, but our engagement was all a mistake."

Dick's glowering glance moved from her to Lambert.

"The heck it was! Look here, Boyd, you—"

"Get out, you kid!" Lambert bellowed. "Get out, all you snoops!"

The audience chuckled derisively and retreated. Except for Dick.

"I'll go when I get my ring back!" he said stubbornly.

Syd Sanderson came into the room. He waved his hat in his left hand.

"Congratulations, Lambert!"

Hope, all eyes and ears, quite forgetting that she might be seen, noticed that Syd shook Geraldine's hand warmly. Then he turned to Dick, saying something under his breath which induced that young man to leave the room with him.

NEITHER Geraldine nor Lambert had yet seen Hope. Now that they were left alone, however, Lambert was glaring at the tall girl.

"Miss Powers," he said acidly, "those confounded men and women swarming in here wasn't by chance. I'll be razzed till— Hey! What part did Syd Sanderson have in this? Tell me the truth."

"All right," said Geraldine. "Why not? It was Syd Sanderson's idea."

"And you're in cahoots with him! If you weren't a woman I'd speak plain!"

"Syd had trailed me to Saddlerock to get back a ring his silly kid brother had given me. And was he hard-boiled!"

"Ring? The ring he sold me for five hundred dollars cash?"

"The same ring, Boyd. Syd made me return to him the ring his brother had once given me. Then he sold it to Dick Claymore, and Dick gave it to me."

"How did Sanderson get hold of it again—and sell it to me?"

"I'm telling you as fast as I can. The next day after Syd had been so tough

with me, he came to see me again. What he said to me made me ashamed of myself and of my tricky, cheating racket."

"Not really!" with sardonic emphasis. "You've got no conscience."

"Well, he did make me ashamed. I handed Syd the ring Dick had given me. 'Return this to the boy and I'll take the first stage out of here,' I told him. But Syd had a better idea. He showed me how, by playing my despicable game once more, I could straighten out the mess I'd made in the lives of certain people here. Syd then helped me by practically throwing you into my net."

"I see that now," Lambert put in. "He lied about your having money."

"No, he didn't. But you won't get any of it. Boyd, I've really got a kick out of making a sap of the smug swellhead who couldn't be vamped! And don't ask for your ring or I'll bring a breach of promise suit to make you look an even bigger fool. So long, sucker!"

Hope, frozen to her hiding-place, and all a-tingle now that she at last realized exactly what Syd had done, heard the other girl's high heels on the stairs.

Boyd Lambert had flung himself out of the room, slamming the door behind him, when Syd Sanderson came into the parlor by another door and reached behind the sofa to draw Hope to her feet.

The cowboy's expression was impish to the nth degree as he led her to a window. "Lambert's heading to Jack Dawson's office," he chuckled.

"To Dawson's office!" Hope was suddenly worried again. "To buy the Bar C, do you suppose, Syd?"

"No! To sell his own spread and duck out of the country. He can't take the razzing he'll get if he stays here."

"Syd," cried Hope, "look yonder! Ada and Dick! Together. And the way they're smiling at each other. . . . Things have broken so fast my head's swimming, but I suppose you satisfied Dick's demand for the return of his ring by canceling his IOU?"

"That's right." Syd slid his arm around her shoulders. "Lambert is the only one who's out any money. About the ring—"

"It's a magic ring," Hope broke in. "It brought you to Saddlerock. And you've made everything come out the way I had it planned. I'm glad it did, and I'm sorry I ever doubted you. Syd, you've been wonderful."

He grinned at her bright, flushed face and sparkling eyes, in which he read something she was afraid to put into words.

"In all your schemes, Lovely," he said, "you left yourself out. What plans did you have for your own future?"

Hope's warm blush made her still more beautiful.

"I guess I didn't think about myself at all, Syd. But I'll make out. I've got a job, you see. Yet I'll never be as happy here as on a ranch," she ended wistfully.

"On our ranch with me, darling?" Syd questioned, lifting her off her feet and into his arms. "On our ranch? With me? For always?" he probed.

"Our ranch, Syd?"

"You've known it as Lambert's Two L. Jack Dawson's all set to buy it for us, honey. Is it to be—for us?"

"For us, of course, Syd. That's the way we both want it."

She lifted her face to his. And in the ecstasy of Syd's tender kisses the world stood still for happy Hope.

A gala roundup of Western action fiction, featuring novels by Norman A. Fox, B. M. Bower and Gladwell Richardson, in the June issue of TRIPLE WESTERN — now on sale. 25c at all stands!

Color Blind

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Dude ranch ramrod Rod Blake was a singin' cowpoke in fancy riggin'—and that's why Dean called him yellow!

ROD BLAKE fidgeted nervously on the top rail of a corral as he watched a whirling dervish bronc go to work on a slim blond stomper. At Rod's side sat a smartly-dressed, lovely girl who tapped a moleskin-covered leg with her quirt as she slyly watched Rod's every reaction to the ride.

Nan Barrow was deeply interested in this handsome ramrod of the struggling little foothills dude ranch outfit, and Rod was not unaware of her presence.

It was Rod's business to be nice to the visitors. He was wholly responsible for their entertainment and care. He'd never known anyone more appealing than Nan Barrow, yet Rod was conscious of the precarious situation of the Foothills outfit. Mart Evans, the owner, was attempting to hang on in the face of increasing opposition.

Mart was an old friend of Rod's dad. They'd ridden fence and herd together down in Wyoming, Montana, and as far south as Texas. Mart had been kind to Rod—had helped him find himself after his return from overseas and however much Rod liked such visitors as Nan Barrow, he kept his mind on the activities of his job.

"That boy can ride, Rod!" Nan said with a sudden sharpness that startled him.

Rod was about to reply in agreement when all at once the sky-walloping sorrel bronc bawled, spun in midair and sent Dick Dean, his rider, hurtling off into space.

Rod was stepping down when he saw that Dean was okay. Pickup men had taken over the wild sorrel, and others had helped Dick to his feet. Rod felt Nan Barrow's hand on his arm.

"Do you plan to ride the wild string yourself again, Rod?" Nan asked. "I mean competitive riding, too. You never enter rodeo or stampede events, do you?"

Rod winced sharply. It was such questions from the dude visitors that often caused Rod's blood to boil over. But he realized that Nan Barrow was no dude. She was the daughter of one of the most successful cattle ranchers along the Alberta-Saskatchewan border. She had a lot of horse sense.

Rod was sick of the questions about his limp, about his foot injury. Didn't most of these dudes realize there'd been a war? Did he have to pull off his boot and show them his scars from a land mine wound at Anzio Beach? Couldn't they just take him for what he was; their ramrod, guardian angel, entertainer?

He shot a swift glance down. Dick Dean was limping toward the corral and Rod could read the angry waddy's lips.

"Danged yellow dude!"

Although Rod smiled, he felt the sharp stab of Dean's lipped implication. More than once he'd felt like pulling out and leaving the dude ranch life for something more active. But he could not bring himself to the point of deserting old Mart who had his heart set on making a success of his beautifully situated little spread. He had hopes of refinancing, and expanding. Rod intended to stick.

DICK DEAN climbed the fence to seat himself alongside Nan, who handed him a cigarette.

"A smart ride, Dick," she said softly. "You had a lot of bronc there. Rod and I were just talking. I was saying it was strange he

As Rod rolled, the gray whirled, squealed and struck

doesn't go in for rough-string riding himself. I believe he—"

Dick Dean's grin cut her off. He turned a sharp glance directly into Rod's flashing eyes. Here was an opportunity he didn't intend to pass up.

"Yeah, Miss Nan," he answered. "We've wondered that, too. But of course, Rod's got his alibi—his limp. His job is to chouse the rest of us, an' now an' then ring in a dark horse, a slick li- that sorrel that just piled me. That critter ain't seen a man since he was a colt."

Rod whirled. He'd had nothing whatever to do with the cutting of the last wild hills bunch brought down to the corrals. He'd never laid eyes on the sorrel before.

For a moment or so he allowed the impulse to call Dean run rampant, but slowly he calmed down. He had always liked Dean, despite the perpetual chip-on-the-shoulder attitude of the blond waddy.

Dean was one of the best hands on the ranch, but there were times when Rod had to ride herd on him, discipline him. Holidayers, especially the young women, were inclined to cause a young dude ranch hand to lose his head. There were times too when Rod had to put thumbs down on Dick and the other hands when male visitors offered them liquor.

Rod's mouth was parted. He was about to go to work on Dean when he got a hail from Mart Evans. A night ride had been planned for Painter Falls, seven miles up the mountain trails.

A couple of old-timers were already up at the beautiful night camp site, working on a barbecue pit. There would be singing, yarns, soft night breezes.

Dick Dean, with Nan Barrow, would sing cowboy duets to Rod's guitar accompaniment. Rod turned to the couple on the fence.

"Better clean up, Dick," he said softly. "It's Painter Falls night. Go spray your tonsils some because you and Nan will be singing." Chuckling, the ramrod limped off to join his boss.

Nan turned to her companion. "You don't like Rod Blake, do you, Dick?" she asked.

"I've got no reason to hate him, Miss Nan," Dick answered, "but we peelers do all the rough work. We take all the jolts an' Rod takes all the glory. In season we go down to the Stampedes—Red Deer, Ponoka, Calgary—ridin', stompin', steer wrastlin', all of which brings the outfit a lot of publicity. You never hear of Rod entering a single event. While we're gettin' choused an' piled, he struts in his fancy riggin' an' draws down the big money."

Nan Barrow smiled softly and laid a hand gently on Dick's arm. "Ever stop to consider Rod's foot injury might be so bad he can't do any rough work?" she asked. "Rod doesn't seem like a quitter, to me. I've been out riding with him alone and I've seen his face all twisted as he favored his left foot. That's a war injury you know. I've tried to question him about it, but he won't talk. What do you think, Dick?"

Dick grunted and flicked a spent cigarette butt into the dust.

"Course you don't want to forget there's other hazers an' stompers here at the Foothills outfit who were in the war, Miss Nan, an' don't forget a limp like Rod packs can bring a guy a lot of sympathy. Mebbe that foot trouble of his don't hurt him half as much as that sorrel twister hurt me tonight. Well, we'd best get prettied up for the Painter Falls trip." There was a note of bitterness in Dick's voice as he turned to the girl to help her to the ground.

He kicked at a clod of clay as he realized that before long his tenor would be blending with Nan's soft contralto as they sang *Moonlight On The Falls* written and composed by Rod Blake.

THE FOLLOWING evening Rod Blake rode off alone. Nan Barrow searched the home yard but failed to find him. She got old Pete LeClaire, the wrangler, to saddle a horse for her and rode off into the deepening twilight.

Up in a shimmering pool, a pool whose source was a mystery, whose water temperature was even more a mystery, Rod Blake sat alone on a heavy windfall log. He was clad in swimming trunks. His body was bent forward as he massaged his right leg steadily. It was old Pete LeClaire who had recommended Rod's visits to these medicinal, warm waters.

Pete figured swims here with massages would do Rod more good than occasional trips to the city for electrical treatments. While most of the hands at the Foothills outfit knew that Rod had suffered a bad foot or leg injury, only old Pete and Mart Evans knew that he'd *lost* his right foot.

Now he rose unsteadily on the broad old log. To Nan Barrow, watching from cover,

he seemed to have difficulty balancing himself for his dive. Suddenly a low gasp escaped her as Rod shot forward. Clearly in the moonlight she saw that right leg. Her heart pounded, and only through blurred vision did she catch the flash of Rod's shoulders as he swam powerfully back and forth.

Dick Dean had suggested that Rod had a yellow streak, and because of this shied off the wild string broncs and competitive rodeo riding. Now Nan Barrow knew. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she turned her horse and headed him along the back trail down to the home yard.

Rod pulled himself out onto the log and sat staring into the pool. The first of the stampede-rodeo shows was coming up. He would be expected to ship down with the boys and stock, ride in the parade and grand opening, and then stand by on the sidelines while such stompers as Dick Dean came out of the chutes to take the jolts for the entertainment of thundering crowds. Slowly he rose and hopped ashore, to dress. . . .

Rod leant on the rail of the timers' tower at the Red Deer show. He was close to the chutes, and his heart thumped sharply as he watched the excellent bucking stock smash against the rails. He listened to the bawling of cattle at the catch-pens and corrals, sounds that blended raucously with the snorts of chuted broncs and the crash of band music. Every now and then he winced at a sharp pain running up his right leg.

Rod wore a smart black satin shirt, with rose-colored neckerchief, fawn-shaded pants, tooled boots, and a wide, sand-colored Stetson. A timers' clerk, a pretty young cowgirl, now and then glanced slyly up.

Now Rod swung to glimpse a chunky dappled gray gelding being saddled in Chute Three. He also saw Dick straddling the top rail of the chute, and Rod's mouth firmed as he realized that Dean had drawn from the hat a whole heap of horse.

"Out of Chute Three, ladies an' gentlemen—Watch Chute Three. Riding Santa Claus, one of our coming bronc riding champions from the Foothills Ranch—Dick—Dean."

Rod Blake clapped his hands. He knew Dick was in for a ride and he was pulling for the hothead to take day money.

The gate swung wide as the dirty gray horse came out coughing. Dick had his spurs shouldered in perfect position. Rod watched him start to dig as the gray came down to brush the ground and lash out savagely with a lightning battery of rear hoofs.

Rod's glance was glued to Dick who was scratching well. The blond cowboy was taking an awful jolting but Rod knew the gray hadn't yet uncorked his worst. It came with a suddenness that almost snapped Dick's head from his neck. There followed a demonstration of bucking savagery that brought the crowd up, muted, to their feet, but with superb timing and riding skill, Dick seemed to be riding it out.

AS THE horn blew, the gray evaded the pick-ups. He went berserk, bounding, swaying in a series of rolling pitches, lashing across the infield arena toward the high, woven-wire fence.

Rod Blake's brows flicked sharply up. Dick hadn't much chance of escaping injury now. The way the gray was behaving Dick was trapped, with no opportunity to deliberately pile himself and escape.

As the bucker neared the fence, he suddenly whirled. Like a streak, Dick dived and grabbed wire. He made it, clinging like a monkey. Teeth bared, the wild hills savage whirled and reared. Rod Blake almost shut his eyes tight as he saw a ponderous forehoof strike. Dick went up, but the hoof caught him a grazing blow in the left hip.

Pick-up riders thundered down and took over.

Rod limped on down to meet Dick who was hurt, but who came hobbling in under his own power. When Rod reached out to help him, the waddy flung himself away, his face twisted with pain.

A slow, mirthless smile toyed with Rod Blake's mouth as he turned to watch Tuffy Carter of the Foothills spread flicking kinks out of his catch rope loops by the calf chute. Rod's teeth suddenly clicked as if some sharp decision had come. He mover over to talk with Tuffy.

Carter nodded. "I think that's a good idea, Rod," he said. "Go on and tell them medicos you want the works. You've either got to get back to ridin' or else—well, you might just as well open a hamburger joint. Luck, cowboy!"

Rod Blake took a night train for Calgary and on arrival taxied out to the Soldiers' Hospital. Tuffy Carter's wise counsel and philosophy had been right. Rod Blake was going to make a final bid for return to exhibition and competitive riding.

IT WAS two weeks later before Rod returned to the Foothills spread where Dick Dean avoided him. Dick had done well in the money events.

When Mart Evans called a night ride to the lower river valley trail, Rod Blake asked Dick to take over.

"Mind, Dick?" he asked. "I've got important mail to get out, and some books to make up. Give 'em a real show, boy—shoot the works, but Dick—no liquor, huh?"

Dean grunted as he shot the ramrod a swift glance of resentment. He figured there was no harm in hoisting the odd highball with some of the male guests. Yet, he smiled. These night rides and camps were especially pleasurable. The company was excellent, the food good and besides, tonight, Dick would have Nan Barrow all to himself.

But Nan Barrow was not with the party. Nor did Rod Blake stay in to write letters. Nan had watched Rod and Pete LeClaire ride north, leading the very wall-eye which had piled Dick Dean so badly. Heart beating sharply, Nan saddled her own favorite black and rode off.

Up at a small plateau, high in the hills, Pete LeClaire rode in close to Rod. "You're shore takin' a awful chance, Rod," the old wrangler observed. "Best give it more thought. A dude ranch, same as any other business has to have a manager. Until yore foot business is a heap better, you'd best lay off."

Rod grinned. He'd been fitted with a newer, lighter artificial foot at Calgary. There was good light tonight. He was determined to make his start now, come what may. Between them, he and Pete blindfolded the sorrel and snubbed him down for saddling.

Mounted, Rod socked back on the buckrein and adjusted his feet in the stirrups. His face grimly set, he nodded to Pete who jerked free the snubbing ropes as Rod flicked off the blindfold, setting the wild thunderer free. Just then Nan Barrow stole up on the plateau, and caught her breath at what she saw.

Rod rode as if he'd been entered in the North American Championship final at Calgary. He scratched with spurless boot heels. Not a single moment did he attempt any move to save himself from the battering dealt out by the worst bucker he'd ever topped. Right hand high, he played it naturally, his pale face changing expression only now and then at a sharp stabbing pain above the ankle area of his right leg.

Twice the bronc whirled to lunge toward the brush, but Pete LeClaire was on hand to haze him off, back into the small open arena. Back a way, Nan Barrow thrilled as she never before thrilled watching a ride. Right then and there Nan made a decision. Her father was a wealthy cattleman, never slow to seize upon an opportunity to back an outfit that showed promise. Nan had a strong influence with him. She could make him understand that Mart Evans and Rod Blake were a worthwhile pair.

She stared as she heard the sorrel bawl. This was no ten-second ride from open chute gate to horn. Rod Blake was determined to ride this outlaw into the ground.

"Yellow—streak!" His thin lips framed the expression. Then suddenly, the sorrel pitched forward, half buckling at the forelegs. Rod's right arm started down but before he could pull leather, the bronc lunged upward to grab for the moon, then suddenly whirled to outwit old Pete, crashing into the brush.

Rod sailed out, badly piled into the scrub brush, and Nan Barrow dismounted flying. She was on her knees beside Rod's twisted form before Pete LeClaire hit the ground.

"Yellow streak." They were the first words Rod uttered as he came out of the fog.

Nan stifled a sob as she raised Rod's head and splashed more water into his face and mouth from Pete's Stetson. Between them Pete and Nan got Rod to drinking, then Nan bathed his scratched, bruised forehead. His eyes almost bugged from their sockets as he recognized her.

"Nan!" he gasped. "You were supposed to —to be along the Lower Valley trail with Dick. Being here will only make things tougher for me."

"Hang an' rattle, cowboy," Nan replied with a light chuckle, a chuckle almost tinged with hysteria. "I can keep a secret. In fact, I already have, Rod. I've known about your foot for some time. You made a swell ride tonight, ramrod. Never in any rodeo arena will you find a worse bucker than you rode tonight."

"T-thanks, Nan. And now that you know, you'll know I've got to go through with everything. Before the war I never missed a show—Calgary, Pendleton, Cheyenne. I figured if I could make a comeback on that

wild string sorrel, I'd be okay. But he pulled a shift on me I've never seen before. The same one that got Pete. But—I'll get him yet."

Nan winced as she saw Rod peel his lips back across his gleaming teeth.

"I'm pulling for you, Rod," she said softly. "I'm going to start some pulling for the Foothills outfit, too. But you go easy. Dick'll ride you again after the Ponoka show. He'll come out of it with day money and likely hit the final payoff, but don't let him get you down. A few more rides, if you aren't foolish enough to get yourself killed, and Dick Dean will come crawling up stuttering apologies. I know. I've seen them all, even at the big Garden show and often at Calgary. You've got it, Rod, but, don't go crazy on us."

THE FOOTHILLS boys shipped down to Ponoka, where Rod Blake showed a more active interest. He helped his calf ropers and even hazed for Tuffy Carter in the steer wrestling events. Dick Dean took saddle bronc money by a wide margin. Coming home through Calgary he stopped off to make a few purchases.

Tonight, he sat in close by Nan Barrow under the stately belt of spruces and cottonwoods at the Foothills home yard. Rod Blake was near by. He heard only faintly Dick's whispered words. Rod turned away, as he saw Dick reach forward to hand Nan a small package.

Nan Barrow smiled a bit wistfully. Always kind and companionable with the ranch hands, she had never encouraged any of them to fall in love with her, not even the handsome Rod Blake.

Her long-lashed eyes flickered as she glanced at the small bracelet Dick had brought for her.

"Don't you like it, Nan?" Dick asked.

"It's beautiful, Dick," she replied softly, "but, I have no right to accept this. I—"

"What you mean is, you figure I've no right to give it. That it?" There was a smack of heat in Dick's words. Rod Blake winced near by.

"Well, in a way, yes, Dick. I've been friendly, but I've tried not to encourage you or anyone else."

"Excludin' Rod Blake, of course." Dick sat sharply up and glared into Rod's back.

Rod turned and Nan was glad of his approach. "You folks ready to go into a song?" he asked lightly.

But Dean pulled himself to his feet.

"You an' Nan better take over," he said crisply. "I got to go see a hoss about a man." He touched his hat and strode off toward the big horse stable.

"Sorry if I horned in at the wrong time, Nan," Rod said slowly. "Some trouble with Mister Hothead?"

Nan forced a smile. "I'm afraid so, Rod. But let's make it look good. Start playing, and I'll sing. What would you like?"

Sharp lights danced in Rod Blake's eyes. "We'll sing my song, Nan. I'll help you. The time's come to make that blond stomper squirm some. He's the best hand we've got here, and I'd hate to see him blow his top complete, but I've given him all the rope I can afford to pay out. Let's go!"

But before she began her song, Nan Barrow touched Rod's arm. "I'm packing tonight, Rod, leaving in the morning. Nothing serious has happened, but I can see the writing on the wall. I'm all for helping you and Mart and I intend to do something about that, but if I don't go, well, Dick Dean will have to and as you say, he's the best man you've got. Try and hang on to him, Rod."

Rod Blake crashed out a heavy cord and broke into the accompaniment of a popular cowboy song—not his own. Near the barn, Dick Dean twisted a pigging string in his fingers as he listened to the music. Suddenly he whirled and made his way to the bunkhouse.

The following morning it was Dick Dean who drove Nan out to the railroad in the station wagon. Rod Blake had planned that for Dick's special benefit.

On his return to the ranch, Dick was called into Mart Evans' office, where he found, too, Rod Blake.

"Set, Dick," Mart said. "Rod an' I have been making a medicine talk."

Dean shot a swift glance Rod's way. "Oh?" he replied.

"Yeah, Dick. Things haven't been goin' too well, financially. I'm not makin' the money I expected to make so the time has come to make some changes. We've got to expand here to meet strong opposition, new outfit comin' up to establish in the lower valley country. A lot of money behind them. So we—"

"How do you mean we, Mart? I thought you was the sole owner here. You mean Rod has a interest in the outfit?"

"I never said Rod has an interest, Dick."

Mart replied crisply. "But I'll tell you this: Rod, like you, has gratuity money, an' both of you have gratuity credits for your war service. Rod's offered to throw in with me. We'd like fine if'n you'd come in, too. That would give us all a good, fresh start. We could make it."

"It don't listen good to me, Mart!" Dick Dean got to his feet. He'd spent some long moments deciding this, for he liked Mart Evans a lot. "I'm—pullin' out," he added with sharp finality, flashing a swift glance Rod's way.

"You don't mean you mistrust me, boy—that I haven't treated you right?" Mart said, half rising from his chair.

"You've been swell, Mart. But I don't see eye-to-eye with your ramrod. Tuffy an' I an' the others do all the rough string work. We do the shows, hopin' for some day money, while Blake rides the parades in his slick silks. Why would I want to pardner a feller in business who hasn't the sand to get out an fit a ride on a bronc? Why did Nan Barrow leave? Because she was afraid to tell me she'd lost her heart to the fancy ramrod, after she'd played me along for a—"

BUT for Mart Evans' swift intervention, Rod's cocked right hand would have smashed into Dick's freckled face.

"I ought to take you apart for that, Dick," Rod said through his white-lipped mouth. "Nan's been one of the best paying, most friendly guests we ever had. She didn't know how to be unfriendly to anyone. You got hipped when a wall-eyed sorrel piled you. You haven't liked me holding you off the liquor. You didn't have enough savvy to know that I had a job to do.

"You haven't enough savvy to know it was you, not I, who ran Nan Barrow out. I—well, cowboy, that'll be all for tonight. Have a sleep on it, then if you want to change your mind, we'll forget all that's been done an' said and start talking sound business. Good night!"

The following morning, Dick Dean took his time. Mart attempted to dissuade him, as did Rod Blake. "You're crazy, Dick, with the Calgary Show just around the corner. Mart here will pay all entry fees and expenses. In fact, you're entered up now. We were banking on you taking the Canadian Championship, if not the North American."

"Yeah? Well, you'd best paint a yellow streak up one of your fancy silk shirts an' go in an' try for 'em your ownself," Dick retorted, his eyes blazing. "I'm pulling out. I'll do the Calgary show my own way, independent."

Mart Evans subsided in his chair, his cheek muscles twitching as he made out Dick's check. He added a bonus of one hundred and fifty dollars he could ill afford. This brought near rebellion from Rod Blake, but he essayed no comment. That "yellow streak" implication had come up again.

Rod's heart beat like a triphammer as Mart handed the peeler his check and also his hand. "Good luck, son," Mart said, softly, huskily. "You're a good hand. If'n you should change yore mind within the next sixty days, come on in for a palaver."

Dean nodded, mumbled his thanks and pulled out. Rod Blake stood clutching the edge of Evans' desk, his face pale with anger. "Wipe that frown off your face, son," Mart said. "I'm willin' to bet all I got left in this outfit that Dean'll be back with us one day."

Rod moved out to his own quarters to write letters. One was to a Calgary Department store, a special order. There were others, letters of entry in the saddle bronc events at the Stampede. For the next few days Rod helped Tuffy Carter, Midge Foley and others at their rodeo practices. He limped on over to Tuffy and asked permission to show him what he was doing wrong with his calf loops.

Rod coiled a loop, mounted Tuffy's horse and nodded to the men at the calf chute. When a bawling little whiteface high-tailed across the open, Rod bore down hard. His loop whirled, stretched and settled in a perfect catch. He didn't dally, but let the rope end fall, while he returned to Tuffy.

"I made an adjustment of your hondo, Tuff. The way you had them fixed, you caused a stiff kink in your loops. Now I'm backin' you to take 'em all at Calgary."

Tuffy Carter was grateful. Old Pete LeClaire stood by, champing his jaws on his eating tobacco, his rheumy eyes alive with a fire of admiration for his friend Rod Blake.

It was Rod who persuaded Mart to allow old Pete to accompany the boys to Calgary in charge of the rope horses.

CALGARY! Crowd-thronged streets! Bunting, store-front hitch-racks, gaiety—eagerness for the big parade. Dick Dean, from a position on the drive seat of an

old chuck wagon, watched the head of the parade swing into position for the start. He watched the smart red-coated Mounted Police escort ride ahead of the lead car of dignitaries, and suddenly he scowled as he glimpsed, riding a handsome palomino, flanked by two beautifully-attired cowgirls carrying flags, Rod Blake in a brand new outfit that caused Dick Dean to squirm.

Dick appraised the silver trappings on the gold horse's saddle, bridle and martingale. He conned Rod's beautiful shirt and bandanna and wide new Stetson which must have set Rod back close to fifty dollars.

"All complete but for the yellow streak up his back," the waddy observed.

"You said somethin', Dick?" an old-timer on the seat beside him grunted.

Dean merely shrugged. Now and then he waved to a group of enthusiastic kids as the old chuckwagon outfit rattled on through the massed crowds. They seemed to sense that the lean, good-looking blond driver would be in plenty of action throughout the week.

Dick certainly was in action. He rode both bareback and saddle bronc events from the go in. From a point of vantage, Rod Blake watched him. He watched Dick come out of Chute Twelve, topping a strong-muscled black which did everything from gate to whistle, but roll over or stand on an ear.

Rod winced as he watched Dean ride out the black. When the horn blared and the pick-ups took over, Dick Dean slid to the ground swaying a moment dizzily while the crowd applauded him for his excellent showing.

The following day, Dick Dean was helping Tuffy Carter rig up his saddle for the calf roping when he whirled at the sound of a P.A. announcement.

"Watch carefully now, ladies and gentlemen. Returning to competitive riding, after nearly six years of absence, riding Powder Blast, Rod—Blake."

"Rod! Uh—Tuff, did you hear that?" Dick Dean almost swallowed his words. He hadn't paid much attention to the program.

A soft chuckle at his back caused him to turn to face old Pete LeClaire, but Pete essayed no observation whatsoever. He slid a stream of tobacco juice through his thin lips, then suddenly jerked his glance around toward the chutes.

The gate swung out to disgorge the Pow-

[*Turn page*]

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The ROSICRUCIANS

San Jose (AMORC) California

der Blast. Clad in old jeans, scuffed boots and a hat that was worse for wear than Dick Dean's, with a shirt that was a dull, faded black, Rod Blake came scratching into action.

Poised superbly, his body seemed to react carelessly yet, as Dick Dean appreciated, perfectly with every devilish twist and roll the big lunker made.

Dick shifted nervously from one foot to another. That chunky roan was more horse than Dick's, but Rod was riding him championship fashion, and the crowd liked it.

Suddenly the big blast bunched, to go sunfishing, but crash dived in the most amazing maneuver Dick Dean had ever witnessed. The heavy roan came down sagging. Again and again he attempted this strange combination of sky hooking and stomach scratching, but Rod Blake outguessed him.

Then, to a gasp of awe from the crowds the gelding threw the devil's all at Blake. Rod's head snapped back. His teeth clenched, and then suddenly his mouth parted in a defiant grin as the roan attempted a whirling end swap calculated to split his rider in two. When the horn blew Rod was still grinning.

He slid to the ground and the pick-ups took over.

Dick Dean found himself alone. Old Pete had shuffled off to throw an arm about Rod's shoulders.

IN THE semi-finals of the North American, Dick Dean stayed in, although point-beaten by Rod, who continued to wear his dirty black outfit. Rod realized he'd have to ride a lot of horse well to take the Canadian Championship from Dean. They hadn't met, except to pass one another and nod. Not even in the tack room had they exchanged any greetings. When Rod smiled, Dean merely nodded and passed him up. On Saturday, Rod noticed that Dick came out in a new outfit of black with a bright rose neckerchief.

The bucker stompers watched with pride as such men as Tuffy Carter and Mace Linden wrestled steers and roped calves to hit into the final money.

Then came the big event—the final of the North American. When Dick Dean's name was announced he tipped his hat to the crowds and hustled to his chute. Nearby, straddling a chute's top rail sat Rod Blake. He wore a light windbreaker over his shirt, for a chilly wind was fanning down from the foothills. Dick Dean never even glanced his way and a broad grin parted Rod's lips.

The heavy bay Dean had drawn showed a wicked eye. His nostrils, flared red, opened and shut like the wings of a big moth. "Coming out of Chute Three, ladies and gentlemen, a popular finalist, on a tough gelding. Watch this wild one—the Bay Chief. Watch this rider—Dick—Dean."

From his point of vantage Rod Blake watched Dick settle in the saddle. He moved into it gingerly, shuffling his booted feet into the stirrups. Now his freckled face tightened.

"Too tense." Rod observed to himself. "He'd best slack up some, or that bay'll tear his head off." The gate swung and the Bay Chief poured himself out into the infield to begin a tornadic display which brought the main stands folk up cheering.

Rod Blake had slid by toward the timer's tower, and as he passed by, he started. Dick Dean had made a little slip, not an infraction, but a slip which would cost him points if the judges, too, had spotted it.

But the slim hothead came through magnificently, and at the horn took a well-merited thunder of applause from the crowd. Dick stood below the timer's stand, swinging sharply as the announcer called attention to Chute Number Eleven. His forehead crinkled in a sharp frown as he glimpsed Rod seated astride the top rail. Rod wore his parade hat and tooled boots. His jeans were new. It was, however, his shirt which caused Dick Dean's heart to go into a sudden handspring. It was a shiny black, whose back carried a broad yellow stripe of silk.

"Yellow—streak!" Dick said bitterly. "He's had it made for my special benefit."

Rod Blake suddenly grinned across from the chutes. He waved and Dick Dean glanced up to see Nan Barrow in company with old Mart Evans and an old stranger. Nan nodded down to him, smiling.

Rod's drawn horse in the finals was getting a big build-up from the announcer. Rod grinned as he settled himself in the saddle. He knew what he'd drawn—a cross between a wild cougar and a case of dynamite.

He swung, hooked his spurs high and nodded. The gate swung out and almost before he was through with his first long pitch the gray horse, Last Chance, almost swallowed himself whole before unwinding like a tripped clock spring.

As the big gray sunfished Rod's rhythmic

scratching was almost spoiled, but Rod rode him magnificently, watching — watching, ready in an instant for any quick shift of which the bronc was capable.

At the tower, Dick Dean's face was screwed up, his lips thinned out and parted across his teeth. He knew a money ride when he saw one. Folks in the stands stamped their feet with approval, and the crowds standing packed against the out rails cheered themselves hoarse. Rod Blake heard nothing, saw nothing save the head of the furious creature under him.

Sunfish, swap, swallow, hog-roll. There was no end to it. The Last Chance threw them all at Rod who grimaced sharply as he took a cantle-smacking that jarred him from the base of the spine up into the roots of his hair.

When the ride was over Rod's face was pale with pain. He had to ride the gray out in a post contest exhibition that nearly struck him unconscious. When at last the pick-ups rode in, Rod dived for safety, but just as he reached, the gray whirled to lash out at the pick-up horse. Rod dropped heavily to the ground and half rolled, but he had barely cleared when the gray squealed, whirled and struck. Screams sounded from the stands. Dick Dean started out on the run.

Rod was hit—hit in the right leg. Dick Dean was the first to reach Rod. He stopped short as he glanced down at Rod's right leg.

"My—gosh!" he gasped. "No—foot!"

Broken straps dangled below Rod's jean cuffs. Lying to one side was a booted artificial foot, and Dick Dean closed his eyes momentarily. He raised Rod's head, but the handsome stomper was coming out of it under his own power. He sat up and touched a forelock in acknowledgement of the thunderous applause, and turned to smile at Dean. Later, in back of the Timers' Tower, Rod Blake was introduced to Nan Barrow's father by Mart Evans.

"Mr. Barrow's staking us, Rod," Mart said. "And he—uh—why, Dick." Dick Dean strode up. He raised his hat to Nan, then turned to congratulate Rod.

"Best I ever saw, Rod, an'—uh—I'm sorry —sorry about the foot. I—wal, you dang grinnin' coyote, I reckon I was just plumb blind. I—"

Rod, balancing himself on one foot, shoved the flat of his hand gently into Dick's face.

[*Turn page*]

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"Pipe down, waddy," he said. "All that was wrong with you was a mite of color blindness. Now meet Mr. Barrow, Nan's father. He's going to take an interest in the Foothills Ranch, and there's still an opening for you. How about it? Coming back home?"

Dean's mouth parted. He glanced shyly at Nan Barrow who smiled and nodded.

"I—I reckon I'm halfways back there a'ready, Rod. Sure. But excuse me now, champ, I've got to go take Pete, Tuffy and the boys out for a—" He broke off grinning. "Reckon you can't lay the thumb on this party, Rod. See you all soon."

Nan Barrow edged up to Rod's side. Her father and old Mart Evans had strolled away. Nathaniel Barrow had been quick to catch Nan's wink. Now she looked up into Rod's eyes, smiling softly.

"Happy now, champ?" she asked.

He nodded. "Happy and mighty proud, Nan. Thanks for everything. Now just watch us go, huh?"

"Us—Rod?"

"Uh—why, sure, Nan. I—" He broke off, suddenly conscious that he'd won another championship.

THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 7)

fifth and Bill Parks was sixth. Bill Ward was best man in the saddle bronc riding, Jack Yale and Babe Ashton tied for second and third places, and Johnny King was fourth, while Tom Cordry and Vic Blackstone split fifth and sixth places.

Dickie Dyer and Rudy Kuechenberg split first and second in the bull riding, Winky Clark and Glen McKinney split third and fourth, Butch Dyer was fifth and Mack McClain was sixth.

RCA Champions

The champions for 1948 in the Rodeo Cowboys Association have been crowned, and will hold the titles till the end of the 1949 season, when the points will again be tallied for the season and titles again awarded.

Gerald Roberts was awarded the all around championship, having accumulated a total of 21,766 points in this one association during 1948 which means that he won as many dollars, as one point is awarded for each dollar in prize money won.

Harry Tompkins, with 11,313 points, won the bull riding championship. Gene Pruett finished with 11,221 points to take the saddle bronc riding championship. Sonny Tureman garnered 9,813 points to win the bareback bronc riding championship. Homer Pettigrew won the steer wrestling championship with 9,906 points, and Toots Mansfield copped the calf roping title with 17,812 points.

In the team roping Joe Glenn finished with the title and 3,881 points. Everett Shaw copped the steer roping title with 3,984 points. The reason for the low score in the last two events is because there are not many rodeos that put on team roping and steer roping contests.

Big Doings at Houston

This year's Houston, Texas, Rodeo, in connection with the Fat Stock Show and Livesock Exposition, was the biggest in its seventeen years. 357,384 was the attendance at the main gate of the Exposition, and the total attendance for the 18 performances of the rodeo was 154,685.

Two hundred fifty-two cowboys and cowgirls took part in the rodeo, which was the greatest number of contestants ever seen in the arena there. The posted purse in bareback bronc riding was $4,950.00 and to this was added the entrance fees at $30.00 each for 78 contestants, making the total of this purse $7,290.00. The posted calf roping purse $4,950.00, plus added entrance fees of 65 entries at $100.00 each, making it total $11,450.00.

The saddle bronc riding purse, $4,950.00, with added fees of 43 contestants at $30.00 each, made a total of $6,240.00. The steer wrestling purse of $4,950.00 had the added entrance fees of 47 contestants at $50.00 each, to swell that purse to $7,300.00.

The bull riding purse was originally $4,950.00 and with the added fees of 63 bull riders at $30.00 each it became $6,840.

There were so many entries in the bareback bronc riding that it took nine performances for all of them to have one trial and so they received only two horses for the 18 performances. In calf roping each roper got

three calves to rope, but in order not to present too many at one performance it was necessary to hold some contests after the performance on a couple of nights. In the saddle bronc riding, each rider got three horses, or there were what is called three go-rounds. In the steer wrestling each contestant got three steers, and in the bull riding each rider drew two bulls.

W. Albert Lee was president of the combined stock show and rodeo. W. O. Cox was General Manager, and Earl McMillan Chairman of the rodeo committee. Everett Colborn was the rodeo producer and managing director, Eddie Curtis and Jerry Ambler were the judges, Fred Alvord arena secretary, Larry Finley and Francis Fletcher timers, Alvin Gordon chute boss, and Ray Lackland the announcer. Lackland took the place of Abe Lefton, who was booked to handle the mike, but who was taken ill after the first performance.

George Mills and Wiley McRea were the clowns. In the horseback quadrille were Pete Kerscher, Fay Blessing, Tater Decker, Jo Decker, Jerry Ambler, Nancy Bragg, Dan Hines, Jeanne Godshall, Bob Estes, Marianne Estes, Glenn Morehouse and Fay Kirkwood.

Trick Riders

The trick riders were Faye Blessing, Jeanne Godshall, Norma Shoulders, Nancy Bragg, and Connie Kay. Among the specialty acts were The Mexican Charros, a group of Mexican performers imported from Mexico City; Arthur Allen and his sheep dogs, Clark Schultz and his trained mule, and Miss Huguette, and her dancing horse, together with numerous events of the stock show including a juvenile milking contest, boys' calf scramble, cutting horse contest, and numerous other events. There was a great gaited horse show the last week of the rodeo, filling the program out to run around three and a half hours, with something going on all the time, exciting enough to interest any audience.

One highlight of the rodeo was the attendance on the last afternoon of Mrs. Morgan Livingston, widow of Morgan Livingston, who won the steer roping contest at Pecos, Texas, on July 4th, 1883, that being the first rodeo held in America, where cash prizes were awarded to the winners of the events but no admission fee charged to spectators. It was five years later at Prescott, Arizona, that the first box office rodeo was held.

[*Turn page*]

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The final results in bareback bronc riding were: First, Tater Decker; second, Jack Buschbaum; third, Gerald Roberts; fourth, Todd Whatley. Decker received $970.00, Buschbaum $730.00, Roberts $485.00 and Whatley $245.00.

Decker won the first day money of the same amount, making a total win for him in this event of $1,940.00 for eight seconds' ride on each horse, or a total of 16 seconds riding brought him an average of $121.30 per second, which is pretty good money in any sport.

In the calf roping the final winner was Troy Fort, and his prize was $1,525.00. Jack Skipworth was second and received $1,145.00. Doyle Riley was third and his prize was $765.00, and Claude Henson was fourth, winning $380.00.

In the saddle bronc riding, Bud Linderman was the winner, his prize being $835.00. Ross Dollarhide was second with $625.00, Bill Hancock was third with $420.00 and Gerald Roberts was fourth with $220.00.

Harry Tompkins copped the bull riding and the prize of $910.00. Gerald Roberts was second, winning $685.00. Jake Monroe was third, winning $485.00, and Jim Shoulders was fourth with $230.00.

In the steer wrestling, Todd Whatley was the winner, and his prize was $975.00. Whiz Whisenhunt was second with $740.00, Bill McGuire was third with $475.00, and Bill Linderman was fourth with $250.00 in winnings.

In addition to the final prizes each winner of first place in the finals was awarded a trophy of a silver and gold inlaid belt buckle, which was very beautiful and artistic, as the gold inlay depicted the action of the event in which he had won.

The hard luck of Gene Pruett, newly crowned world's champion bronc rider, was evident. He rode his first bucking horse, making a swell ride up to within a second of the whistle and was bucked off. He won one fourth day money, $140.00, for which he paid $30.00 entrance fee, so he didn't make expenses as his traveling expenses and hotel bill would amount to considerable more than he won. But this does not mean that he isn't every inch a champion. He's a great bronc rider, but Lady Luck did not smile upon him on this occasion.

Orange Festival

The Orange Festival Rodeo at Davie, Florida, was a swell show and drew big crowds.

Claude Tindall and Bo Bronson were the producers. The judges were Ralph Collier and Bill Parks, the timers Louise Mefford and Mary Parks, the arena secretary, Buddy Mefford, arena director Vic Blackstone, pickup men Jim Day and Johnny King. Specialty acts were Mildred Murphy and her horse Red Fox, Chip Morris and his horse Little Fox, Jack Andrews and his trained bull Henry, Fred Clancy and his trained mule Bette Davis. Chip Morris was the announcer.

Among the trick riders were Fay Blackstone, Nell Rogers, Peaches King, Bobby Boulter, Chip Clancy, and Alabama Slim.

The final results in bronc riding were: First, Jack Yale; second, Vic Blackstone; third, Howard Crouch; fourth, Eddie Guy.

Vic Blackstone copped the calf roping, Pete Clemons was second, Jim Day was third and Buddy Mefford fourth. Charlie Barnes was best man in the steer wrestling, Bob Stokes was second, Jim Day was third and John King was fourth.

Curley Hatchell and Winky Clark rode a dead heat in the bull riding and split first

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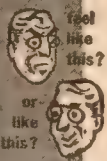

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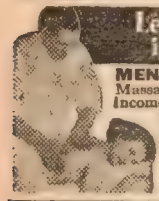

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and second, Dickie Dyer was third and Pete Baker fourth.

Well, waddies, that is about all there is to dish up at the old chuck wagon this time, so we will be looking for you when next we pass this way. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

OF ALL the characters created in western fiction, the one which stands out as the most popular, the most dramatic, the one to best capture the imagination of readers—that one, without a doubt, is the character who operates as a lone wolf.

Where it began, no one can accurately say, but the portrayal of the lonesome man who has been hurt by life and who hides the warmth of his character under a shell of hardness, who combines tough efficiency as a fighting machine with tenderness toward the weak and small, has remained as the symbol of the westerner.

He is a strong man and because he knows his strength he never abuses it by bullying, by tyranny, or cruelty. He is reserved to the point of Indian stoicism, but when he chooses to let the bars down he is as friendly and playful and affectionate as a puppy. He is a grown up kid—but a kid with steel in the core of him. And occasionally he is a far-sighted, wise citizen who plans for the future as a man of intelligence must. But above all he is dramatic, colorful, as vivid as the west that mothers him.

Such a man was Ross Haney, the hero of Jim Mayo's great novel in our next issue, THE RIDER OF THE RUBY HILLS.

Ross Haney had seen trouble in his time. It had hardened him and because it had given him an adequate knowledge of his own strength, it had given him self-confidence as well. He was rich in the knowledge that the good things of life come only to those who know what they want and are willing to fight for it if they have to.

"I've been fighting for existence ever since I was big enough to walk," Ross Haney said. "I've fought to hold other people's cattle, fought for other men's homes, fought for the lives of other men. I've worked and bled and sweated my heart out in rain, dust and storm. Now I want something for myself."

And his idea was as simple and direct as his philosophy. He would pick on the big-

gest man in the country, not the smallest. The biggest was rancher Walt Pogue.

"I know how Walt Pogue got his ranch," Haney said. "Vin Carter was a friend of mine until Emmett Chubb, Pogue's gunman, killed him. He told me how Pogue forced his old man off his range and took over. Well, I happen to know that none of this range is legally held. It's been preempted, which gives them a claim, of course. Well, I've got a few ideas myself. And I'm movin' in."

But there was not only Walt Pogue to fight. There were other big ranchers—Chalk Reynolds and Star Levitt, both of whom were big enough and rich enough to hire as many gunmen as Walt Pogue. And against all these, Ross Haney came alone!

This is a powerful story, of the kind Jim Mayo excels in. You who have read the Lance Kilkenny stories by the same author know his powerful, driving style, the terrific suspense and the great classic battles that he describes so well. THE RIDER OF THE RUBY HILLS is such a story. For not only was Ross Haney strong and had unbounded confidence in himself. Pogue and

[*Turn page*]

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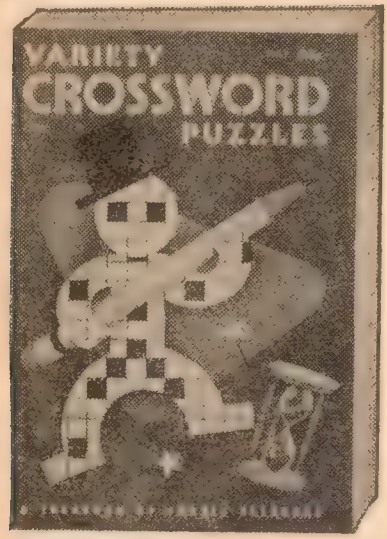

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This one is called FIDDLEFOOT'S RETURN and it tells the story of Fiddlefoot Potter, who rode out one day to look for a strayed cow and was gone for two years. But just because Fiddlefoot has a curiosity about what's over the next ridge, don't get the idea that he's a weak or vacillating character. Nossir, old Fiddlefoot is a plumb explosive and determined character once riled up. And when he gets back to his homestead and finds a character by the name of Cameron Sprowl has burned down Fiddlefoot's shack and built a ranch on his land, Fiddlefoot is plumb annoyed. He figures that Sprowl owes him one room—that being all there was to his shack.

And Fiddlefoot is a very obstinate hombre. He collects that room in a way which we expect will be brand new to you, it certainly was to us.

This story is a howl from start to finish. You Sandstone fans need be told no more than that.

Also next issue, AN AMBUSH FOR ZORRO by Johnston McCulley—the very latest in the ever-popular series about the Fox of Old California, whose pistols and rapier were ever at the service of the poor and downtrodden.

Zorro, who had a habit of minding his own business when in his alter ego character of Don Diego, was doing that very thing when he saw Jose Vallejo, a trader, carrying out his own ideas of justice upon the persons of four miserable peons in bondage to him. The justice of Jose Vallejo always took the shape of a whip and it was the whipping of helpless men who could never strike back which always transformed the dainty, refined Don Diego into the whirlwind, avenging Zorro.

But there was a catch to the trader Vallejo. "Did you notice how he rides?" Diego asked Fray Felipe. "Is his seat in the saddle that of an ordinary trader? Or is it the seat of a military officer who cannot disguise the fact even out of uniform?"

So maybe it was a trap, rather than the simple thing it seemed. But Zorro, the Fox, loved traps as he loved the breath of danger. And any ambush was a tempation to him, to test his wits and skill against the hunters. There's action and adventure aplenty in AN AMBUSH FOR ZORRO by *Johnston McCulley!*

There'll be other grand stuff in the issue too—more fiction, feature articles, Foghorn Clancy's popular CHUCK WAGON column, this column on stories planned ahead and our letter department where the readers can get things off their chests.

LETTER BOX

WITH summer officially here, thoughts of the ole swimming hole and that wonderful trout stream in the mounains are bound to intrude upon your reveries. Mebbe some of you folks are figurin' on taking a trip west for your vacations. There's some mighty fine dude ranches out that-away. But for those who can't, the next best thing is curling up in a comfortable armchair with your copy of West. And when you do that, take a couple of minutes out to dash off a letter or postcard to us. We'll be proud to hear from you and glad to print your letter and make you famous. Like this:

I sure liked WAR ON BIG MUDDY, your story in March. Boats were important in the old days before railroads and we don't get too many stories about boating in the West. Also I like stories with a little history in them—not the dry kind, but enough to make it sound real.

—*Saul K. Porter, San Bernardino, Cal.*

Author Charles N. Heckelmann informs us that we'd be surprised at the amount of research he does before tackling a story like WAR ON BIG MUDDY, with its historical background. We're glad you enjoyed the yarn, Saul.

When did these Sandstone stories start anyway? And can I get more if I missed any? The first one I've run into is A WIFE FOR SLIM in March and I laughed so hard my shoelaces untied themselves.

—*Armand Fraser, Fort Wayne, Ind.*

Funny thing, the same thing happened to us when we read A WIFE FOR SLIM in manuscript. Since then we've always double-knotted our laces when an Ames Sand-

[*Turn page*]

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stone story comes in. But to answer your question, the series has been running some time now—this is the fifth or sixth story. The first one was WIDDER MALONE'S COURTSHIP which appeared in April, 1948.

This gun series you are running is great stuff. We get a kick out of reading them. How about some dope on bows and arrows? I mean the good stuff, not toys.

—Warren Beatty, Lubbock, Tex.

Well, now, Warren, archery as practised today isn't strictly speaking "West," being based on the English methods rather than that of the American —Indians. The Indians were not good archers—they were such wonderful woodsmen that they depended on their woodcraft to get them so close to a quarry they couldn't miss. Their equipment was crude.

The English longbow was a much more precise weapon, capable of considerable accuracy and long range, plus tremendous penetrating power. A yew war bow with a pull of 100 pounds would go through a suit of armor like a hot knife through butter. But it may be a little out of our field.

I am sitting here and trying to get over reading THE CITY OF SILVER, which I don't believe a word of it. Your own heading said, "A mystery man from Texas invades a roaring outlaw paradise!" That's the part I object to. What's an "outlaw paradise?" And how does it roar? I think you're carrying the exaggeration of the Wild West too far. It was never that crazy wild.

—Thomas Beany, Harrisburg, Pa.

Oh, it wasn't, huh? Tom, we recommend that you read a couple of books like "Tombstone," "Dodge City, The Cowboy Capital," "The Big Divide," "The Saga of Billy the Kid," "Triggernometry" and "Wyatt Earp" —all of which are fact, not fiction. Read the real lowdown on the old wild towns of the West and then write us again. Bet you a plug of eating tobacco you'll be apologizing and telling us we've been playing *down* the wildness instead of exaggerating it. Brother, them days were wild!

And that's about all for now, *amigos*, so the rest will have to wait until our next trip around. Keep your eye peeled for that coming issue of West we told you about. Please drop us a line, too. Just address your letters and postcards to The Editor, WEST, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks, everybody!

—The Editor.

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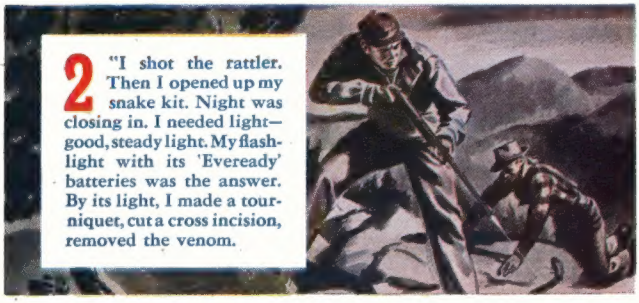
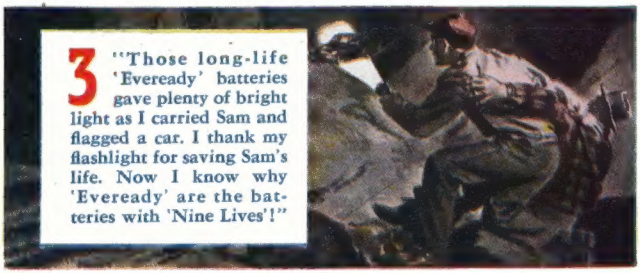


2 "I shot the rattler. Then I opened up my snake kit. Night was closing in. I needed light—good, steady light. My flashlight with its 'Eveready' batteries was the answer. By its light, I made a tourniquet, cut a cross incision, removed the venom.



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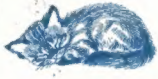

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